

# GRAVY

\$7



ISSUE #56

## SUMMER COCKTAILS

A QUARTERLY FROM THE SOUTHERN FOODWAYS ALLIANCE



# THE SFA SERVES YOU...

## Cocktails of the Rural South

BURNT SUGAR 9  
...merara Rum, Reposado Tequila,  
... Burnt Sugar, Vanilla Bitter  
...CHO



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COVER PHOTO by *Denny Culbert*. PHOTO ABOVE by *Amy C. Evans*

EDITOR'S NOTE

# SUMMER READING, SUMMER SIPPING

by Sara Camp Milam



SUMMER IS NOT MY FAVORITE SEASON, and as far as I can remember, it never was. I dislike the following activities, in combination or individually: wearing a bathing suit, sweating, and getting sunburned. And all three are utterly unavoidable in this part of the country between May and September. (I'm a really fun person, though. I swear!)

Then again, summer's good for a few things. The top two are cold drinks and good books. When I was younger, this meant the Parrot-Ice brand of gas-station slushies slurped while reading trashy mysteries that were maybe not quite age appropriate. Today, my summer fantasy looks more like a glass of rosé, or a Campari and soda, served alongside a fresh novel, preferably humorous, that errs on the lighter side of literary fiction. Last weekend, *The Vacationers* by Emma Straub fit that bill. (My colleague Melissa was lukewarm on this story of affluent, dysfunctional Manhattanites vacationing in Mallorca. If you read it, let us know which side you're on.)

From ages eight to fifteen, my other favorite thing about summer was spending three weeks at camp in the North Carolina mountains. These days, my lanyard skills are rusty and I doubt I could scramble up a rock wall, much less rappel back down. Instead, I look forward to the adult equivalent of camp: the SFA Summer Symposium. By the time you read this, we will have just returned from a weekend in New Orleans learning about po-boys, banh mi, and Technicolor Bourbon Street cocktails.

In the hope that you, too, enjoy a refreshing summer beverage, we packed this issue of *Gravy* with cocktail stories. It seemed like the right kind of summer reading—and then, as luck would have it, we hit a few toast-worthy milestones. First, we won the James Beard Foundation Award for Publication of the Year. And a personal achievement: This issue marks my five-year anniversary as *Gravy's* editor.

*We raise a happy-but-sad toast to Devin Cox, our longtime graphic designer for Gravy and myriad other SFA projects. You know that "SFA Look" you've come to associate with our printed materials? That's Devin. As his career grows in Austin, Texas, Devin is retiring from Gravy. We can't thank him enough, and we wish him the best. In the next issue, you'll meet our incoming designer, Richie Swann. 🍷*

PHOTO by Sara Wood.

# GOOBER RIG

by Sandra Beasley

Of course. Of course the *gnuba* quivered  
underground in their legume-shells, waiting.  
Of course the bottle straddled the dirt  
with contoured glass. Of course it was a gusher,  
rich cola swelling toward the neck, skyward,  
crested by peanuts and salt-sweat,  
and of course we opened our grateful mouths,  
of course we taught our children the new way,  
and what at first seems an idiocy of syllables  
becomes the only creation story you need. 🍷

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*Sandra Beasley's latest collection of poetry is Count the Waves, published in June by W.W. Norton.*

ILLUSTRATION by Natalie K. Nelson.



LEGACY

# CREOLE SCHNITZEL

NEW ORLEANS AND GERMANY,  
PAST AND PRESENT

by *Phil McCausland*

THE RESTAURANT THAT SERVED my personal comfort food—schnitzel, spätzle, and blaukraut—closed twenty years before I moved to New Orleans. Faded gold letters embedded in the cracked sidewalk still mark St. Charles Avenue near Canal Street, as does the restaurant's iconic navy-blue sign. Both spell out K-O-L-B-S. That name, and the Creole-German fare associated with it, still loiters here. I know I won't ever taste Kolb's food, but a walk past the building often determines my next home-cooked meal.

The surname Kolb isn't uncommon in New Orleans. Here, most folks pronounce it "cob," which forces its bearers to spell it out and explain that, no, they have no relation to the famous restaurant, nor can they fathom what will happen to the old Kolb building. Kolb's restaurant opened in 1899, and to New Orleans' German population this seemed a grand entrance into the immigrant city. Since Germans arrived in Louisiana in 1721, many settled outside of New Orleans on what they called the German Coast, which hugged the Mississippi River. They founded villages that sounded like home: Karlstein, Hoffen, Augsburg, and Marientel. Today, the area is St. Charles Parish.

By the nineteenth century, Germans were the largest foreign-speaking ethnic group in Louisiana and called 12 percent of the New Orleans population their kin. Meanwhile the German Coast swelled and prospered agriculturally. But the years weren't kind to the German people's customs, which often lost out to those of the more powerful cultures. Present-day New Orleans touts the influence of Spanish and



K O L B ' S  
125 St. Charles Street

New Orleans

French settlers on the city, including its Creole cuisine. More recently, the contributions of Italian, African, Native American, and Caribbean foodways have received their due. The struggle over the cultural pecking order lingers. Today, Germans have more or less withdrawn from that conversation.

Kolb's was the last bastion of German-American culinary relevance: an institution famous for its ability to combine the entrenched Creole flavors of New Orleans with the cuisine of its homeland. One of its later menus claimed diners could "come celebrate Oktoberfest every day of the year at KOLB's." Today the famous Kolb's sign, now dark, continues to trail down three stories of balconies a few blocks from Canal. Once a proud beacon, it is now a sad reminder. The empty building rests, a ghost watching as the city fails, triumphs, constricts, and expands.

FOR THE PAST FOUR YEARS, I have made my home in Mississippi and Louisiana. Back in Pennsylvania, my German mother finds this troubling. All she knows of the region is the thick heat and the difficulty she had understanding Southern accents when she first came to the United States. For two years in the late 1970s, she and my Army-officer father lived in military housing in Savannah. She recalls the legions of green anoles that died at the hands of their sliding-glass door and the tree frogs that stuck to the windows. She regularly implores me to move closer, to New York or Washington, D.C., and tempts me with the retelling of the dinner she made the night before: schnitzel and knödel, or maybe käsespätzle, the thick egg noodles enriched with Emmentaler cheese and caramelized onions.

Mom learned to cook by watching Oma, my grandmother, who continues to live on her own in the same village she settled in with Opa, my grandfather, after World War II. Both my grandparents were born and raised on the western edge of today's Czech Republic. When the War broke out, Opa's brothers, mother, and stepfather escaped to Bavaria. Opa couldn't join them: The Wehrmacht drafted him into the service. Soon after he arrived at the front, the Russians captured the seventeen-year-old soldier, and he spent four years in a prison camp. When I was a child, he told me stories of dancing to keep warm, learning Russian from a children's book, subsisting on potato skins, and enduring constant death threats from his captors.

He broke his leg in captivity, and the Russian and German governments negotiated his release. He found his family through the Red Cross and they took the train west to a city named Ulm, on the border of Bavaria and Baden-Wurtemberg, where he met my grandmother and found work rebuilding the city after the bombing raids. On the side of a hill in a tiny village a few miles away, he built a home that held three different growing families as well as his mother and stepfather, Oma's father, a cousin's parents, and a few unmarried siblings.



The older members of the family passed away in the house and the younger generations moved out and built their own homes nearby: some a few houses down the street, others on the opposite side of the village. Two generations later, when I visit, I get the impression that I'm related to most of the people I meet. They all know me before we've made an introduction: I'm instantly recognizable as the only American.

DANIEL PRATT ERECTED THE KOLB BUILDING in 1847—three stories, brick, with enormous balconies—to store and sell his own brand of cotton gins. A later owner turned the third floor into an art gallery, and then into the Louisiana Jockey Club, which gained a reputation for debauched revelry. Perhaps this notoriety is what attracted Conrad Kolb.

Seventeen-year-old Conrad entered New Orleans in 1891. At age twenty-five, he bought Pratt's building, changed the name to his own, and served the food he'd grown up eating in Bavaria. As he built and marketed Kolb's, Conrad bought a farm on Gentilly Road, soon adding more land to his plot on the opposite side of the city in St. Charles Parish. His wife, Mayme Schlosser, helped run the farm, providing the restaurant with its produce and farm-raised goose, pork, chicken, beef, and milk. The restaurant even bottled and served its own wine, a Bordeaux Claret. Kolb's practiced vertical integration and farm-to-table long before those business strategies became vogue. In the old country, most people, no matter their profession, ate this way—to Conrad and his wife, a simple idea—and so that's how they did it at Kolb's.

Early menus didn't focus on German fare exclusively. Dishes included crabmeat four different ways—Imperatrice, à la Dewey, à la Maryland, à la Cardinal—as well as Royal Squab en Casserole, Broiled Pompano à la Mexicaine, and Russian caviar. A few German offerings made their way through: German-style potatoes served as a common side; the lunch menu featured a Kalter Aufschnitt, or German charcuterie plate; and various dishes could be ordered "German-style," likely meaning an occasion to use heavier oils and thicker mustards and deliver a punchier tang from vinegar or beer.

Slowly the restaurateur mixed the tastes of his birthplace with those of his new home, creating a German restaurant with a Creole flair. Red beans and rice were a constant on the menu, locals came to slurp down turtle soup and seafood gumbo, and the restaurant eventually offered Kolb's Schnitzel: "Finest sliced leg of veal, pan fried, topped with sautéed lump crabmeat."

Kolb's became the preferred restaurant of early-twentieth-century New Orleans businessmen. Its location right off Canal Street, where the city's businesses—such as the United Fruit Company—clustered at the time, provided a comfortable luncheon spot. As they left work, sometimes with clients, these early-century entrepreneurs would duck into the alley and enter through Kolb's back door, to avoid the streets and its commoners. They'd slip through the kitchen, keeping one eye on the bubbling pots of tomato broth for chilled consommé and seafood gumbo and the other on the grill and its searing knockwursts, lamb shanks, schweinebraten, and tenderloin. Perhaps they wondered if they'd try the schweinsaxe, or pig knuckle, this time or stick with Kolb's self-declared specialty, barbecue shrimp. As long as you knew which alleyway door belonged to Kolb's, no kitchen worker would give you a second glance. Entering through the back door meant you were part of the extended family that coalesced around Kolb's.

Inside, the decor read Teutonic: deep chocolate woods, large, intricately decorated beer steins on the walls, and German symbols, like the Emperor's crown-toting black eagle emblazoned with a hefty K. A constantly running leather band connected the ceiling fans in the grill area of the restaurant, their motor resting in the floor above the dining room. The same fans once cooled an exhibition hall at the Cotton Centennial Exhibition of 1884. In 1995, the apparatus spun for the last time. Today, the John Besh restaurant Lûke, only a few blocks from Kolb's building, pays tribute to its neighbor's legacy. Fans with a similar system turn overhead, and the menu has featured jägerschnitzel, maultaschen, and kraut with a Creole vibe. But Kolb's has no direct descendant in the city.



PUT THOUSANDS OF MILES BETWEEN PEOPLE and those interwoven familial strands begin to unravel. The distance becomes more than geographic. After Oma suffered a stroke, she stopped cooking. She stopped doing her favorite crossword and gave up her frequent games of Skip-Bo and Mensch Ärger Dich Nicht and Chinese checkers. Instead, she spent her days reading flimsy romance novels purchased from a newspaper stand at the train station or watching Catholic mass on television. When Mom flew from Pennsylvania to Germany to take care of her, she filled her bags with packets of chicken-flavored instant ramen because Oma would still boil water. When she returned, Mom cooked many of the meals she'd learned as a child: Wiener schnitzel, knödel (boiled dumplings), kartoffelsalat (vinegar-based potato salad), maultaschen (thin layers of pasta with a meat filling), spätzle (egg noodles), schupfnudeln (sweet, thick, gnocchi-like noodles), and sauerbraten (German pot roast). It was a special occasion when Mom made those dishes at home in the States, usually only preparing them for holidays, birthdays, or houseguests. In Germany, it was a daily expectation.

My seventeen-year-old brain, addled by marijuana smoke, muted my concern over the situation. I became intensely more interested in collecting Lionshead Beer bottlecaps and finding someone to sleep with me, selfishly unwilling to acknowledge that my family's dynamic had changed. During the period mom returned to the fatherland, my brother, father, and I ordered take-out or cooked meals in a Crock-Pot. Thanksgiving didn't happen because we didn't know how long it took to defrost a turkey. I've never gone a longer period of time without German cuisine—the food that fills my body with the sense of consolation that only home can provide.

After I graduated from high school and quit smoking pot, I moved to Germany to attend language school in Munich. My grandparents were ill: Oma was recovering from the stroke, and Opa suffered from prostate cancer and Alzheimer's, which seemed to progress by the day. During the week, I'd attend classes and go to clubs on wild nights or walk across the park to the Hirschgarten, the largest beer garden in the world, on quiet ones. Weekends, I often took the train to Ulm, a two-hour ride, and had one of my many cousins pick me up and bring me to my grandparents' house, in which Oma now lived alone. My mother and her brother moved Opa to an assisted living facility in nearby Blaustein.

Saturdays and Sundays I spent reading, talking to Oma, or running errands in Opa's old hatchback Renault: grocery shopping, picking up prescriptions, and visiting him in the facility. Usually he didn't recognize me when I came in—I'd grown a thick beard and long hair. He'd always known me as the soft-cheeked kid with a weak grasp of German, the most American of his grandchildren.

He'd ask me kindly how my day had gone, tell me vague stories of his work building homes—always pointing with his right ring finger, which a chain tore off at the knuckle in a construction accident—or tell me jokes. I last visited him in early October of that year. We sat mostly in silence. He would stare at me and strain his eyes as if trying to solve a particularly difficult math problem someone had stenciled on my forehead. Then he'd shrug and sigh and look away. After this



L: A Kolb's menu  
 R: Oma with the author's mother and uncle, ca. 1956



fourth exchange, his eyes caught a picture of my family that stood on his nightstand. He looked at me, then the picture, me, then the picture.

“Phillip?” he asked.

I leaned forward and nodded, “Ja, Opa.”

He told me to keep working hard and fell asleep.

DURING WORLD WAR I, Kolb's suffered from fervent anti-German sentiment. New Orleans and the rest of the country viewed German-Americans with suspicion. Act 114, which the Louisiana state legislature passed in 1918, made all expressions of German culture and heritage, especially the printed or spoken use of the German language, illegal. Savvy New Orleans Germans “Americanized” their surnames, taking on their French equivalents. The German “Troxler” and “Zweig” became “Trosclair” and “Labranche.” Parents stopped teaching their children German language and history. Outside of Kolb's, jingoistic locals allegedly strung up and burned a straw dummy of Conrad's body, perhaps in reaction to news that Das Deutsches Gesellschaft, a New Orleans German group, had raised a hefty \$7,000 for the war effort in their homeland, or maybe in response to a pro-German rally held in Gretna around the same time.

The story of the Conrad Kolb effigy comes from an oral history, unconfirmed in contemporary news reports. Still, if we accept this as fact, it happened while Conrad sold Liberty Bonds to finance the U.S. war effort at an anti-German rally held in Lafayette Square. The speakers—local businessmen and community leaders—spat fire at the cheering crowd of 2,000, shouting phrases like: “Ninety percent of the Germans born in the United States and 100 percent of those born in Germany are unfaithful to this country.” “I believe every German alien should be interned, not in a palatial hotel, but where he should be placed at work.” And, “It would give me no hard feeling if you would hang every pro-German and make me the hangman.” All the while, the German immigrant Conrad Kolb walked between the rows and personally urged the audience members to buy Liberty Bonds. By the end of the fundraiser, the crowd had raised more than \$15,000.

When the United States entered World War I, most German immigrants maintained a low profile. At Kolb's, Conrad adjusted his menu to subvert the antagonism, focusing on familiar dishes: shrimp



L: Kolb's bar area

R: Extended Schiessl family and new house, ca. 1950

cocktail, thick-cut steaks, crawfish étouffée, and fried fish. He replaced traditional German singing groups with jazz musicians. Kolb's introduced jazz to more affluent crowds while distracting them from the restaurant's origins. Johnny De Droit, the cornetist and bandleader, began playing at Kolb's in 1919. Thanks to this exposure, De Droit was one of the most sought-after jazz musicians in 1920s New Orleans.

These shrewd moves by Conrad made his restaurant a New Orleans institution, and the hostility of the First World War era didn't affect it after the Treaty of Versailles. Perhaps by the interwar years, New Orleanians couldn't remember the city without Kolb's. Maybe they didn't want to give up their lunch. Kolb's flourished through the period and continued to serve growing lunch and dinner crowds. This marked a happy and successful period for the restaurateur until his death in 1938.

Even without its original owner, Kolb's stayed the course. It gained such traction within political circles that famed *New Yorker* writer A.J. Liebling took notice. In his 1961 book *The Earl of Louisiana*, which investigated the fallout from Louisiana Governor Earl K. Long's commitment to a mental institution, Liebling visited Kolb's as many of the state's leading politicians talked shop in the German eatery. By then, Kolb's was a local fixture, not a foreign novelty. “In Kolb's they served planked redfish steak, snapping-turtle fricassee, jambalaya and gumbo, as well as pig's knuckles and wursts, so that their diapason is wider than a German restaurant's in less favored regions,” Liebling wrote, adding that the atmosphere was “noisy and as full of politicians as rye bread of caraway seeds.”

OPA DIED THREE DAYS AFTER MY FINAL VISIT. I took off school, met my mom, and helped arrange the funeral. But I soon realized the help I provided was negligible. I was old enough to tackle what was asked of me, but never able to consider what needed to be done. This I found frustrating, as I grew aware of those responsibilities and my inability to shoulder them, living within that grey area of adulthood devoid of any self-certainty.

The family held Opa's memorial at the village's newest church. The funeral procession passed the old chapel he and I had gone to throughout my childhood, its windows dark. The whole village seemed to appear at the service to offer condolences, the pews filled by wrinkled faces I found vaguely familiar. After the service, we walked to the graveyard. Oma didn't cry, but she held tightly to my arm as the procession came to a stop before the small plot in the front corner of the cemetery. At the house she'd given me a green wool sweater she'd knit for him but hadn't had a chance to bring to the facility. I wore it then and rubbed its cuff between my fingers.

That night, I sat alone on the corner bench in the kitchen. I recalled Opa as he pulled out assortments of smoked meats from the fridge, telling me the differences between each and asking me which I considered best. I poured his favorite wheat beer into one of the glasses he'd kept at the top of the corner cabinet. I pulled short before I drained the bottle's final swig, rolled it on the table so the sediment would mix, like he'd shown me since childhood, and dispensed the rest of its contents.

Oma would only shrug when I asked her about Opa over the next couple days, sometimes removing her dentures, placing them on the table, and looking away, or saying something along the lines of "That's that," or "everyone I've known has died." Her stories began to circle back to the War and her life before my grandfather, and to the men who'd courted her before they met. Mom and I would just nod. Eventually, Oma gave me Opa's watch and wallet and told me to return to school. Before I left, she helped my mother with dinner: a sauerbraten, her first cooking attempt in over a year.

IN THE YEARS following A.J. Liebling's visit to Kolb's, Conrad's vision gave way. The new owners of Kolb's turned up the kitsch, rendering the menu a stereotype of German tavern food. They added new types of schnitzels, though many of the famous New Orleans-influenced dishes lived on. In the 1970s they began hosting an annual Oktoberfest, reinforcing the German novelty.

As the French Quarter revitalized in the 1970s and 1980s, Kolb's popularity waned. It was the only German restaurant in the city, and perhaps this lack of competition caused its standards to plummet. Developers demolished the Kolb farm, an old Victorian farmhouse on fenced property north of the Industrial Canal, so that the neighboring Schwegmann grocery store could add a parking lot. The house and its Saturday "Tyrolean Night" parties had once been a fixture of New Orleans' social scene.

The federal government declared the Kolb's building a National Historic Landmark in 1991, but in 1995 the restaurant closed. For the past twenty years, various groups have come and gone, hoping to reuse the space. The late Dickie Brennan Sr., former owner of Commander's Palace, took an interest at one time. Each attempt fades and disappears as new ideas began to float, leaving the structure unchanged and unfazed by the passing years.

Kolb's style of German-Creole cuisine remains largely absent from the city, though restaurants like Lüke and Jager Häus gesture toward its legacy. This leaves me, a young man starting his life in New Orleans, starving for the food that makes me feel safe and loved. But I can't ask the city to provide that for me. Now, when the desire grows too strong, I set out three bowls: the first filled with flour, the second an egg wash, and the last breadcrumbs. I heat oil on the stove and after pounding a pork chop flat, I coat it with each ingredient and a little salt and pepper. I place it in the pan and listen to the sizzle. 🍷

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*Phil McCausland is a contributing writer to the New Orleans Advocate. His writing has also appeared in The Oxford American, Eater, Paste, and VICE Munchies. IMAGE, PAGE 7, The Historic New Orleans Collection 1983.162.35. IMAGE, PAGE 9, Early menu from Kolb's, Ephemera Collection, Louisiana Research Collection, Tulane University. IMAGE, PAGE 11, The Charles L. Franck Studio Collection at The Historic New Orleans Collection, 1979.325.4701. IMAGE, PAGE 13 (left), Early menu from Kolb's, Ephemera Collection, Louisiana Research Collection, Tulane University. IMAGE, PAGE 13 (right), courtesy of the author. IMAGE, PAGE 14 (left), The Historic New Orleans Collection, 1990.126.28. IMAGE, PAGE 14 (right), courtesy of the author.*

# SUMMER COCKTAILS



PHOTO by Amy C. Evans



# I'LL TAKE MY CHANCES

THERE'S NO WRONG  
WAY TO MAKE A  
FRENCH 75

*by Kat Kinsman*

YOU WILL NEVER MAKE MY FAVORITE DRINK INCORRECTLY. I will not allow that to happen. Not in a didactic, bossy, or witchy way—I don't have printed recipe cards in my purse or the proportions tattooed up my forearm. I'm just fully prepared to enjoy whatever version of a French 75 you'd care to serve me. Life is too short to be doctrinaire about my cocktails or deliberately set myself up for disappointment. At least not when there are bubbles to be drunk.

I have a thing for this drink. It hits all my buttons: tart (usually lemon juice, sometimes lime), sweet (sugar, simple syrup, or orange liqueur), fizzy and fancy (Champagne or a reasonable analogue), strong—and here's where it gets interesting. By the reckonings of most old-tyme bar books and fellas with wax-tipped moustaches, the hard booze used can be either gin or Cognac. Either is right, so neither is wrong—and I might as well try plenty of 'em just to make sure. It's not just because I love to sip a French 75 in the cool of a hotel lobby in a city where I've never been before, pair one (or two) with a rare, long weekday lunch that makes me feel like I've thieved an hour from the gods, or nurse one at a sleek, bland airport bar as my flight time gets shoved back, and back again.

It's not *just* the drink; it's the conversation and surprise that's served alongside it, especially at a place where they're not often ordered. I'm not a jerk, strolling into a beer hall or a honky tonk, demanding my twee little beverage. But if I see the makings on the bar, maybe a lightly abused piece of citrus and a stab at a cocktail list, I'll take my chances.

"Uh, what's in that?" the bartender might ask.

I rattle off the ingredient list—minus any proportions or serving suggestions—any way they interpret it is fine by me. I'm used to the look of alarm, and I'm quick to quell it. No, seriously, make it however you want to, and I guarantee I'll love it.

The hundred or so that I've drunk have ranged from good to sublime, poured into flutes, coupes, snifters, Martini glasses, goblets, garnished with lemon peels that range from a waning crescent of zest to a meticulously carved Cthulhu that threatened to breach the bounds of the glass. Sometimes there's fruit: A rookie bartender at a favorite local tavern stirred an orange wedge and a few brandied cherries into the mix after pouring my French 75 over ice in a pint glass.

His manager came scurrying over—*Oh god, I didn't realize he was making that for you. Is it OK? I can always....*

Are you kidding? It's a triple serving of my favorite drink with a straw jammed into it. If you have to carry me home, I'll be smiling and singing "La Marseillaise" the whole way there. Not that a French 75 (it's actually the name of a piece of WWI field artillery) is definitively French—there's much debate over its place of origin. Some say it came into being at Harry's New York Bar in Paris, or possibly the Hotel Chatham down the Rue Daunou. Others maintain that it came from an American fighter pilot or the Buck's Club in London. Maybe a variation on a Tom Collins or a Champagne Cup, but possibly an upgrade on the popular French combo of Cognac and Champagne.

Should you be lucky enough to nab an empty stool at Arnaud's French 75 Bar on Bienville Street in New Orleans, Chris Hannah—the (non-moustached) bartender who has likely poured more of them than anyone else on the planet—just might hand you a four-page, typewritten, imagined conversation with the long-dead and legendary bartender Harry Craddock, wherein they muse over those very origin stories.

I don't recommend that, though. Not at first. Not until you've gotten a few dozen under your belt (not all at once) and fully appreciated the range of expression, the possibilities of the mixological palette that can create a French 75. Because the one Chris will pour you might ruin you for the rest. It starts with a frosted tulip glass. Then Courvoisier VS, sugar, and lemon juice shaken and strained, then topped off with Moët and Chandon. Then a twist. Then bliss. Then regret.

When I visited Arnaud's on Easter morning this year, I chased Hannah's French 75 quickly with a cup of coffee and a massive seltzer, needing to lightly mar the memory. I get to New Orleans increasingly frequently, so I'm confident it won't be my last, but knowing it's out there makes me have a bit less abandon in my explorations. Like meeting the love of your life when you're in high school and still have so much misguided kissing, screwing, and crushing to do. I'm not ready to settle down yet. I still have many years of wandering and tipping ahead of me, but now I know I'll always have that taste of Paris. Or possibly London. And definitely New Orleans. 🍸

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*Kat Kinsman is the editor-in-chief of Tasting Table. Her debut book, Hi, Anxiety, comes out in March 2016, and she will be drinking a lot of French 75s before then. PHOTO, PAGE 20 by Andrew Thomas Lee.*



## A LOVE LETTER TO THE OLD FASHIONED

MAKE AN OLD FASHIONED AND  
YOU HAVE TRANSFORMED WHISKEY

by Jerry Slater

“WHAT’S YOUR FAVORITE COCKTAIL?”

“What do you drink at home?”

I’m asked those questions a lot. I own a drinking establishment on the east side of Atlanta that has a bit of a reputation for elaborate cocktails and a well-stocked whiskey selection. After I teach one of our cocktail or bourbon classes, patrons frequently ask me about my own drinking habits. I sometimes worry about disappointing the enthusiasts with my simple answer: I drink Old Fashioneds. Okay, I also drink Manhattans, and various

improvisations on Manhattans. I drink a lot of wine with my sommelier wife, and I occasionally just want a cold beer after a long day. But when someone asks, “What is your cocktail of choice?” The Old Fashioned is it.

Like the majority of chefs I know, who don’t really cook at home, off-duty I like to keep it simple. My work space is better stocked for pomp and circumstance. At home, a bottle of bourbon, a bottle of bitters, and some cubes of sugar are enough. If I remembered to fill the ice tray that makes large cubes, or to steal a lemon from work, things are even better—but neither is necessary.

An Old Fashioned made in the old-fashioned way is the drink equivalent of rustic Italian cuisine: simple and elegant. Take a sugar cube (I prefer brown for its kiss of molasses, but white will do), add a

couple of dashes of Angostura bitters, and muddle with a half-ounce of water. Add two ounces bourbon—rye is just fine, too—and a large cube of ice or two. Stir, and garnish with a spritz of citrus oil from a long strip of lemon peel.

This may not be the Old Fashioned that you grew up with. There is another “Old Fashioned” out there. It involves pulverizing an orange and an unnatural candied cherry with a packet of sugar. A purveyor of such drinks sometimes sometimes adds bitters. Sometimes he forgets. After, he adds a little whiskey and a lot of ice. If this wasn’t enough to make you order a beer instead, the same bartender finishes the murky,



fruity drink with a generous splash of soda water, insulting your whiskey and propelling said cocktail further out of balance. There is a theory that this “Old Fashioned” came to prominence during Prohibition, when bad whiskey needed to be masked.

Others say the Old Fashioned was created at the Pendennis Club in Louisville, Kentucky. As the story goes, it was first mixed by, or for, a bourbon distiller by the name of Colonel James E. Pepper around the turn of the twentieth century. This is such a pervasive story that I repeated it at a Southern Foodways Alliance summer Field Trip in 2008. That afternoon Julian Van Winkle III made Old Fashioneds for everyone in the famed club’s pool room, giving further credence to the tale.

Dave Wondrich, author of *Imbibe!*, points out that the original “cock tail” dates back to 1806 and includes spirits, bitters, water, and sugar. A hundred years later, to have a cocktail in the old-fashioned style was as much an adjective as it was a noun. Bartenders never like to let the truth get in the way of a good story. And as a turn-of-the-century bourbon distiller, Colonel Pepper didn’t let truth stop him from using the story to hawk his wares at the Waldorf-Astoria in New York City, where the Old Fashioned became popular. Liquor marketers were the original Mad Men.

Let’s talk about why I love an Old Fashioned. Make an Old Fashioned and you have transformed whiskey. A potent and singular spirit has been bittered, sweetened, mellowed, chilled, and bequeathed a bright and pleasing note of lemon essence. The drink evolves as you sip it. It starts off strong and bracing, with the spice of the bitters married to the whiskey’s sweeter tones. In a proper glass, the drink has weight, and the clink of large ice cubes against its sides tolls a welcome tune. Most of us will give a slight shake to hear it.

As the ice melts slowly, the Old Fashioned becomes easier and easier to drink—until, about three-quarters of the way through, it might become too sweet. This is not sacrilege to say. The sugar and bitters, muddled together at the beginning, were barely held together by the whiskey. And not all the sugar dissolved in that slurry. This is the time for a patch. Just one more ounce, maybe one more ice cube, to put the drink, and therefore the world, back in balance. 🍷

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*Jerry Slater is the owner of H. Harper Station in Atlanta, Georgia.*

*PHOTOS by Andrew Thomas Lee.*

# FRENCH QUARTER COCKTAILS

MEET THE MEN AND WOMEN  
WHO KEEP THE QUARTER BUZZING

*Oral History interviews by Rien Fertel  
Photos by Denny Culbert*

*Pam Fortner & Earl Bernhardt*

TROPICAL ISLE

*Bourbon St.*

YEARS BEHIND THE BAR: 30

SIGNATURE DRINK: *Hand Grenade*



“We went to buy back-scratchers for the Tropical Itch drink, and there were these toy hand grenades in the Mardi Gras store where the beads were sold. So we said, ‘Oh wow, we ought to make up a drink to go with that.’ We thought it should be strong and green.”





## Shelly Oechsner Waguespack

### PAT O'BRIEN'S

St. Peter St. at Bourbon St.

YEARS BEHIND THE BAR: 25

SIGNATURE DRINK: *Hurricane*



“In the late 1940s, when they were trying to promote the Hurricane, what they would do is ask pretty ladies to walk around the patio drinking a Hurricane, or asking gentlemen if they would like to taste a Hurricane. Now you kind of go, ‘oh my gosh! I can’t believe they used to do that!’”





## Marvin Allen

### THE CAROUSEL BAR

Hotel Monteleone, 214 Royal St.

YEARS BEHIND THE BAR: 13

SIGNATURE DRINK: *Vieux Carré*



“At shift change, we’re coming and going and people are applauding us. We go over the bar. We do not go under. There is no ‘under’ — there’s no door, there’s no nothing. We have to basically hop up, put our rear ends on the bar, spin around, and hop out. There’s been times when they gave us —like in the Olympics — points from 8, 9, 10. We have fun with it.”

## Trey Monaghan

### MOLLY’S AT THE MARKET

1107 Decatur St.

YEARS BEHIND THE BAR: 10

SIGNATURE DRINK: *Frozen Irish Coffee*



“If you can get the inside seat facing the jukebox in the front door, it is the best seat in Molly’s because you can see the whole length of the bar. You can see everyone walking back and forth on Decatur Street and you’re not losing anything with your back to a wall. So you literally have no fear of missing anything.”



## Chris Hannah

### ARNAUD'S FRENCH 75

813 Bienville St.

YEARS BEHIND THE BAR: 17

SIGNATURE DRINKS: *French 75, Sazerac*

"I think the reason why I haven't left — I mean, I've never lived anywhere eleven years. I'd never lived anywhere more than four years. But I realized how much fun it is to actually be a part of something. You could be a character in New Orleans. Everyone knows each other, and we all play a part in being what New Orleans is."



## THE WALKER PERCY

Recipe by Chris Hannah

"The Walker Percy is a drink I came up with that I'm really happy about. Inspired by the late novelist's love of bourbon, I wanted to come up with a sipping-style, bourbon-based cocktail. It's a whole half-ounce of Angostura and a half-ounce of a pomegranate syrup and two ounces of bourbon and then a little lemon syrup, shaken. And I'm proud of it because it's hard to make a drink with a half-ounce of Angostura without it being overbearing and overpowering."

2 oz. bourbon

1/2 oz. Angostura bitters

1/2 oz. pomegranate syrup

1/4 oz. lemon syrup

Shake ingredients and strain over ice. Garnish with a lemon peel. 🍸



# SHARK ATTACK!

YOU'RE GONNA NEED A BIGGER ASPIRIN

by Brett Martin



THE HURRICANE AND HAND GRENADE are more famous. The Jester, the Huge Ass Beer, even the Fish Bowl, sloshing with bright red liquid around sunburned necks—all appear more often in quickly regretted Instagrams. But for me, the greatest of all Bourbon Street drinks is one of the least known: the Shark Attack.

All those concoctions, of course, hold roughly the same position in cocktail circles that Bourbon Street itself does in relation to Approved New Orleans Culture: at best an embarrassing uncle you hope doesn't show up at your wedding, at worst something so vile and vulgar that you define your very identity in opposition to it.

If you read *Bourbon Street: A History*, by Richard Campanella, though, the one thing that becomes clear is that the notion of Bourbon Street as not the “real” New Orleans is a false one. And I'd argue the same is true of Bourbon Street's drinks—that they are in fact as authentic and organic an expression of New Orleans culture as the Sazerac or the Ramos Gin Fizz—and should be just as celebrated, if not necessarily drunk as often.

None more so than the Shark Attack. There are explanations for the drink's lower profile: Unlike the Hand Grenade, it is not legally protected by trademark, which makes it much less potentially lucrative. Nor, like the Hurricane, is it sellable in souvenir powdered form that would allow you to take it home. In fact, you could say that the Shark Attack is more of an act of puppet theater than a drink. Like the Hand Grenade, it is served at a small chain of Bourbon Street bars called Tropical Isle, but it's kind of like the secret menu at In-N-Out Burger, insofar as anything that arrives with sirens, ringing bells, whistles, and screaming bartenders can be considered secret.

I moved to New Orleans in January 2011, and for the first six months I lived just off of the corner of St. Ann and Bourbon Streets, the very epicenter of raucous gay New Orleans. I have said many times that it was like going to sleep every night with your parents having a party in the next room, if your parents happened to be six-foot-tall drag queens singing Whitney Houston.

If you're living on Bourbon Street, it behooves you to decide very quickly that you will learn to *love* Bourbon Street. This is a matter of survival. By force of will, I grew to appreciate walking home at night, alone, through the crowds, letting them sort of slide across my vision and I would think, “All these people are having the time of their lives. *Isn't this wonderful.*”

The other important thing is that it was very cold. Coming from the northeast, I had brought one sweatshirt and a light jacket, not realizing a) that my 200-year-old house would have giant gaps in the windows and b) that New Orleans gets a cold, wet, miserable winter. The only time I have ever slept in a winter hat was that January in New Orleans. So, though it is against my nature and inclination, I wound up forced to spend a lot of my time in bars.

One night I was at Molly's-on-Toulouse, which is right across the street from the original Tropical Isle, and a woman came in who had just gotten off her shift. She was complaining about a memo she had received chastising the staff about their performance of the Shark Attack. This is

## THE REST OF THE BARTENDERS ARE RINGING BELLS AND SETTING OFF SIRENS.

how she described that performance: When the customer orders a Shark Attack, you first fill a large plastic cup with vodka and a blue-tinted sour mix. On the top you float a small plastic crocodile.

Thus endeth Act One.

Next, you fill a plastic shark with grenadine syrup and you swim the shark “menacingly” toward the unsuspecting crocodile. (Apparently, the memo from the Tropical Isle higher-ups said that the staff was being insufficiently menacing.) Meanwhile, the rest of the bartenders are ringing bells, setting off sirens, and blowing whistles and screaming—and this is very specific—“Get out of the water. Get out of the water. A shark attack is about to occur!” Tropical Isle owner Earl Bernhardt apparently insists that the correct language is, “A Great White Shark Attack is About to Occur.” I have never heard that. Either way, it is not the syntax I'd be inclined to use if a shark attack was about to occur, but the memo was very precise.

And finally, the denouement: The bartenders plunge the shark into the drink, turning it into a roiling bloodbath. And then you drink.

I'm pretty sure I made this poor woman at Molly's tell the story five times, each time with a drink. Evidence suggests that at some point everybody in Molly's went across the street together and saw the Shark Attack in action. The evidence being that, the next morning, feeling less than 100 percent, I put on my coat, felt something strange in the pocket, and opened it to find a plastic shark, its insides still sticky with grenadine residue. I called my girlfriend in New York, apologizing that I hadn't called the night before to say goodnight. “*Oh, you did,*” she said, so meaningfully that I did not ask for more details.

AS I MENTIONED, the Shark Attack is not proprietary. In fact, there are other versions of it—or at least other drinks with the same or similar names. The Shark Bite, for instance, is the signature drink of the Holiday Inn SunSpree in Montego Bay, Jamaica, where it consists of orange, pineapple, and lime juices, rum, 7UP, and a little grenadine for the blood effect. It appears that the first drink called the Shark Attack in the New Orleans area was served at an establishment called Augie's DeLago, which operated on the lakefront from 1978 to 1987. Augie's was open twenty-four hours and had ten bars and two restaurants. In the summer, people used to tie their boats up three and four deep to get inside.

I talked to Jerlyn Courtney, whose family owned the place and who acted as general manager, and she said that their Shark Attack was a promotion from Malibu rum and consisted of Malibu and grenadine. When I asked if there were any bells and whistles or plastic sharks, she said, essentially, “No way. We didn't do any extras. We were just trying to sell drinks as fast as we could.”

There is even another contemporary Shark Attack in New Orleans, served at a place called Lucy's Retired Surfers Bar & Restaurant. There, a very bored-looking bartender tossed a plastic mermaid in my glass before half-heartedly sending the grenadine-filled shark in after it. “Stupid mermaid,” she muttered.

Sitting there, it occurred to me that the very thing that I first mocked about the Shark Attack at Tropical Isle was, in fact, the thing that made it genius: The script.

This is a drink in which the drink itself is all but irrelevant. It has no recipe. What it has is a story, an idea, a construct. In this it is merely an extreme version of what is true about any iconic cocktail: How else could

a Martini, say, be made with either gin or vodka—two totally different spirits—in a drink that only has two ingredients? If the specifics weren't less important than the *idea* of a “Martini,” the way having a “Martini” makes you feel? How else could there be 500 kinds of Old Fashioned if what was most important wasn't the notion of the “Old Fashioned”?

That's why Tropical Isle takes the time to ring the bells and blow the whistles. Because without the performance, there is no drink.

There are cities in America that might make you feel foolish for this. For being hoodwinked by the story, dazzled by the show. New Orleans is not one of those cities. In fact, the thing that New Orleans may be best at is telling stories: stories you want to hear, stories that then—and this is the important part—become real, become authentic culture.

There is no place in the world in which there is a narrower gulf between the fake and the authentic, between the touristy and the insider, between the story and the substance. The whole city is founded on a narrative about New Orleans as a place apart, a kind of foreign city-state within American borders. In the telling, it became real. Some people come to New Orleans for a story about faded Southern grandeur. Some come for a story about an immaculately preserved African American street culture. And some come for the story that having the ultimate good time should involve lights, sirens, a zoologically dubious sea drama, and a twelve-cent plastic shark.

Away from Bourbon Street, the Shark Attack is a shitty vodka sour with a shot of grenadine. On Bourbon, it's the fulfillment of a promise—a promise that the story of New Orleans is real. And that it is here for you, waiting, for \$9 and a sugar hangover—by any standard, a small price to pay. 🍸

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*Brett Martin is a GQ correspondent and the author of Difficult Men: Behind the Scenes of a Creative Revolution and, forthcoming, Fuck You, Eat This. A version of this piece was delivered at Tales of the Cocktail in 2014 and at the SFA Summer Foodways Symposium in 2015.*

PHOTO, PAGE 35 by Denny Culbert.

## [POP]CORN FROM A JAR

### MOONSHINE FROM THE FUNNY PAPERS TO FEDERAL PRISON

by Mark Essig

MARVIN “POPCORN” SUTTON, at the wheel of his Model A Ford, bumps along a gravel road in the Smoky Mountains until he spies the perfect streamside site. Then, using mud and rocks, solder and wheat paste, a copper pot and a galvanized metal trash can, he constructs a still. It's a jerry-rigged beauty, the type of contraption you'd see in old photos surrounded by the fedora-wearing lawmen who will soon bust it to pieces.

This particular still, though illegal, operated under a higher cultural license. Sutton, with help from his friend J.B. Rader, built it for the North Carolina filmmaker Neal Hutcheson, who edited his footage into a film called *The Last One*. That documentary, broadcast on PBS stations, earned Hutcheson an Emmy and turned Popcorn Sutton into a celebrity moonshiner, the man who preserved the ancient mountain tradition of squeezing liquor out of corn.

Sutton's work, however, reflected some modern influences. Late in the film, when the still springs a leak, Sutton patches it with a dab of wheat paste and a strip of cloth torn from a clean white undershirt. (“That paste—when the heat hits it, it gets harder than a minister's dick,” he says.)

“Believe it or not,” Sutton explains as he ties the cloth around a pipe, “I learned this trick right here off that Snuffy Smith shit in the newspaper.”

“Comic strip,” Rader says, laughing.

“Yeah,” Sutton replies.

The authentic Appalachian moonshiner, in other words, had learned his trade, in part, from a comic-strip hillbilly.



Snuffy Smith—poker cheat, chicken thief, moonshiner—sprang from the mind of Billy DeBeck, who studied at the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts before he took up cartooning. DeBeck first hit it big in the 1920s with *Barney Google*, a strip about a top-hatted lover of horse races and prize fights. In a 1934 storyline, Barney Google paid a visit to the fictional North Carolina mountain hamlet of Hootin' Holler, where he met Snuffy Smith, who proved so popular with readers that he became the strip's star.

## POPCORN PEDDLED AN ERSATZ NOSTALGIA.

It was the heyday of the hillbilly. The Al Capp comic *Li'l Abner*, set in the Kentucky mountains, also began during the Great Depression, and together the two strips cemented the stereotype in the American mind. Pop culture depictions range from gentle (*The Beverly Hillbillies*) to vicious (*Deliverance*) but always portray Appalachia as a region bypassed by civilization. Actual residents of the mountains, already struggling with poverty and economic exploitation, now faced the condescension of outsiders who confused cartoons with reality.

A few mountain folk saw a way to turn stereotypes to their advantage, especially as the region's economy shifted toward tourism. The hillbilly took up residence on signs advertising the gift shops and hotels of the Smokies, beckoning tourists with the promise of an imagined Appalachia.

Popcorn Sutton took the marketing a step further. He was, without doubt, the real thing: A native of Haywood County, North Carolina, Sutton learned bootlegging from his grandfather and was known to distill a high-quality liquor. By the time he became an adult, however, commercial liquor was legal and cheap, and the true outlaws of Appalachia trafficked in methamphetamine and marijuana.

The mood-altering substance Popcorn peddled was not so much ethanol as an ersatz nostalgia. Some friends of his owned a bed-and-breakfast in Maggie Valley, and he parked his Model A—one of the two Model A's he owned, in fact—in the yard and contributed artifacts to help decorate the Moonshiner Suite. Notoriety, Sutton knew, increased demand for his product, which at times brought \$100 a gallon. If tourists wanted to buy moonshine from a hillbilly, he'd sell it to them at a premium.

Popcorn Sutton played the role of an X-rated Snuffy Smith. Like the cartoon character, Sutton was a tiny man who wore overalls and misshapen hats. Sutton's hat, however, had a raccoon's penis bone tucked into the band, and his sense of humor was not fit for



the newspaper. In an interview with Johnny Knoxville, of *Jackass* fame, Sutton detailed his preference for plus-sized women and showed off the mirrors on his bedroom ceiling. He also displayed a granite grave marker he'd commissioned: Future visitors to his final resting place would be greeted with the message *POPCORN SAID FUCK YOU*.

A friend once warned him, "You can't be a movie star and make liquor, too."

"You can't sell it if no one knows you have it," Sutton replied.

They were both right. In 2008 federal agents raided his property in Cocke County, Tennessee, and discovered hundreds of gallons of moonshine and a 1,000-gallon, gas-fired, stainless-steel still in which Sutton cooked a mash from sugar, not corn. That copper pot in the woods was strictly for marketing.

Sutton pleaded guilty and asked the judge for leniency, explaining that he suffered from chronic obstructive pulmonary disorder and might not survive a stint in prison. He was sentenced to eighteen months. Just before he was due to report to prison, he committed suicide by running a hose from the tailpipe through the window of his Ford Fairlane. He was sixty-two. His wife, Pam Sutton, explained that her husband called the Fairlane his "three-gallon car" because he'd acquired it in trade for that much whiskey.

It was an outlaw's exit, but Sutton's afterlife has been strictly by the book.

His name lives on at Popcorn Sutton Distilling, makers of Popcorn Sutton's Tennessee White Whiskey (bottled at a modest



88 proof). Pam Sutton is a partner in the Newport, Tennessee-based business, which recently revealed its lofty ambitions by hiring away George Dickel's master distiller. The firm uses neither the ramshackle still Sutton built in the woods, nor the stainless steel behemoth he fired up for his production runs, but gleaming copper-pot stills that would look at home in any craft distillery.

It's hard to imagine Sutton's former customers finding what they were looking for amid all that high-end equipment. Sutton sold more than white whiskey, just as Snuffy Smith offered something beyond mockery of mountain folk. Snuffy may have been a "shif'less skonk," but shiftlessness offers liberation from respectable society and its tedious demand that we hold steady work and obey the law. Generations of newspaper readers, scanning the funny papers over coffee before shuffling off to the office, must have felt at twinge of admiration as Snuffy outwitted Sheriff Tait and then took a nap in the woods. Popcorn Sutton brought that criminality to life, and gave it an uncomfortably jagged edge.

According to the website of Popcorn Sutton Distilling, "the only difference between our 'likker' and Popcorn's is that we pay our taxes." But that difference is everything. With moonshine, the illicit is the appeal. That burn in the throat tastes like freedom. 🍷

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*Mark Essig covered Popcorn Sutton's final sentencing hearing for the Asheville Citizen-Times. He is the author of Lesser Beasts: A Snout-to-Tail History of the Humble Pig. PHOTO, PAGE 40 by Andy Armstrong. SNUFFY SMITH COMIC, PAGE 43, courtesy of King Features Syndicate.*

# HISTORY BY THE JIGGER

AT JULEP, THE PAST IS  
ON THE MENU

*As told to Gravy by Alba Huerta*



## SOUTHERN, IN A JIFFY

I was born in Monterrey, Mexico. My family moved to Houston when I was six. My parents are only about twenty years older than me, so we all kind of grew up together. We were learning what it means to be Southern. One day I was grocery shopping with my mother, and we came across a display of Jiffy cornbread mix. The logo on the box was a beautiful shade of blue, and it was very affordable. My mom instantly loved it and made it every day. So cornbread became a staple at our Mexican table.

My first and only job was bartending. I loved it from the minute I started doing it fifteen years ago, and I never wanted to do anything else. I was trying to learn about classic cocktails and the history of drinking culture, which led me to become interested in Southern drinkways and ingredients. When we talk about the actual drinking culture in the South, there's little documentation, because for a long time it was taboo to talk about drinking beyond social clubs. I also like to read about the cultures and applications of Southern food, and how those can be paired with drink. I think it belongs somewhere in our current history to have these things be available to us: These are our cultures, these are our spirits, these are our ingredients and our produce. That's the reason this bar exists.

## STOCKING THE BAR

Whiskey, Cognac, and rum are the foundational spirits of Southern drinking—although originally, wine and beer were more prevalent in the region than liquor. Cognac probably arrived in the South first. Much of it came through New Orleans, and a lot of that didn't make it out of New Orleans. Prior to whiskey becoming more palatable and refined, Cognac was the spirit of choice. Whiskey began to rule the South when phylloxera was killing grapes in Europe. And around that same time, whiskey became more palatable. Early on, a Sazerac, for example, was often made with Cognac, but later replaced with whiskey or rye. The antebellum julep, too, was made with Cognac.

Bourbon and rye whiskey are very young spirits in world-historical terms: The earliest production of these spirits only goes back about 300 years. Cognac and rum have been available for much longer. Because of Prohibition in the early twentieth century, there was such a lapse in the production of American spirits—namely whiskey. The truth of the

matter is that people are going to drink. So we see an influx of rum during Prohibition. In the present day, tequila is ascendant on Southern cocktail menus, largely because of our proximity to Mexico.

As I see it, there are Southern drinks, and then there are Southern *applications* of recipes that aren't necessarily native to the South. Historically, if a cocktail was created in a certain city—New York or New Orleans, for example—then it was made for that demographic.

In the nineteenth century, Jerry Thomas created his drinks for New York bars, and they were very boozy. A Southern regional cocktail bar exists to create cocktails for the people we are serving. Julep is in Houston, where it's high humidity most of the time, so my cocktails should be made for this weather.

### ONE YEAR, FOUR MENUS

There are so many things to cover as far as what's Southern, and the different ideas people have about what is Southern and what is not. In talking about cocktails, I felt like we needed to have a more refined view of how we put together our menus and how they would translate better. The idea was to do a whole year of menus based on the development of the South and its drinkways.

The year began with our Rural South menu. Rural places charm me; I love visiting the more rural areas of Texas and getting to know the people in those places. So my part in telling that story is how elements of the rural South can affect, or be applied to, today's drinking culture. The flip, which has been around for a long time, is a type of cocktail made with an egg. Our Amethyst Flip is made with Cognac, sloe gin, egg, Champagne, nutmeg, and purple sweet potato—hence the name. Sweet potatoes have long been an important

Southern crop, so here we're applying a rural element to a classic cocktail. We've given it a name, a premise, a purpose—so now it's a Southern drink. Then there's the Snake-Bit Sprout: gin, pineapple, lime, and apple cider. We infuse the gin with chamomile, which was used as a home remedy for snake bites. And cider was and is brewed in this region with apples that aren't good to eat. So there you've got multiple folkways in one drink.

The next menu will be inspired by the South's port cities: how spirits were imported, where they landed, and what they were mixed with. The menu after that will play with the term "trading with the enemy." During the Civil War, soliders from the North and South bathed in the same rivers, and those rivers became places where trade occurred. So we will take Northern cocktails and make them Southern, or vice versa. We see this as a chance to expand our minds and play with different recipes. For instance, we're planning a New Orleans Buck made with buckwheat ginger beer—a New England crop. In the last part of the year, the menu will explore drinking societies. I say "drinking societies" as a very general term—any organized group that would have had a gala or other special party, would have created its own cocktail to commemorate that event. We're following the trend of people's actual consumption during that time, because it will be the season of holiday parties.

### DON'T BE A STRANGER

Houston doesn't have any zoning, so we are quite spread out. The first thing that I look at as far as creating a culture of regulars is that people are going to love a bar if they get good service: good hospitality, kind people serving them. If that is in place, guests will come back. What are the things that we do to ensure that they have everything they need, and that they feel special? Those are the basic human rights of any kind of bar. Everything that goes into putting our menus and our service together is about how we give our customers a great experience. The premise is always the same. We like to say that before we were making cocktails, we were making friends. You create people's love for a space that belongs to them. 🍷

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PHOTOS by Amy C. Evans.



# THE OBJECT OF MY OBSESSION

## INTO THE STRANGE WORLD OF BOURBON COLLECTING

by Sean Brock

I BLAME RATHEAD.\* Somewhere around 2006 or 2007, he offered to buy the kitchen a round of Pappy Van Winkle after he had dinner at McCrady's. My reply was, "I've never heard of that." Well, it's all been upward from there. I'm the first to admit that I have a very obsessive nature—you would know that if you've ever heard me talking about Carolina Gold rice. These days, the object of my obsession is collecting bourbon.

After discovering Pappy Van Winkle, I needed to understand why it was so good and what came before it. That curiosity led me to researching the Stitzel-Weller distillery, and eventually to trying a bottle of 1950 Old Fitzgerald courtesy of Pappy's grandson, Julian Van Winkle III. In the years since, I have jumped into the strange world of whiskey collecting. I thought chefs were crazy, but the whiskey community is full of obsessive-compulsive hoarder types, and I seem to fit right in.

In order to become a reputable collector, you have to do your homework. Turns out I'm pretty good at whiskey homework! First, you must read every book you can find about the history of bourbon. It's a bizarre and complicated history, filled with more tall tales and stretched truths than a presidential election. You'll study the history of tax stamps, memorize the UPC codes from various distilleries, and learn about "Bottled in Bond" and DSP numbers. You'll read about all the generations of master distillers from your favorite brands.

Next, you need to develop your palate. This may sound indulgent, but it's not about getting intoxicated. You'll add new flavor descriptions to your vocabulary: wet cardboard, old magazines, and fresh waffles. The key is to sample whiskeys from numerous distilleries and from many different eras.

I invite a group of friends over every month for tasting sessions. Each person brings a bottle based on the theme of the evening. We taste through them, jotting down notes like some sort of over-analytical wine critic. We record the nose, the color, the viscosity and texture. We record the front palate, the middle palate, and the finish. We stand around my kitchen calling out flavors as they come to us: "Wet grass!" "Graham crackers!" "Tootsie Rolls!" We compete to see who can correctly identify a particularly tricky bottle. Those are some of my favorite evenings spent with friends.

Finding rare bourbon is referred to as "the hunt." This entails driving around far-flung neighborhoods, seeking out rarely frequented liquor stores, and peering behind bulletproof glass for hidden bottles that have been collecting dust for decades. Finding a dusty in the wild is exhilarating. There are stories of people who come across insanely

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\*Mike "Rathead" Riley of Bristol, Virginia, is a longtime SFA member and cheerleader.



rare bottles of Very Very Old Fitzgerald from the 1950s—sometimes still in the box—when cleaning out their grandmother’s basement. And that’s when the sharks start to circle. The moment that lucky soul posts a picture on a whiskey forum, innocently wondering what the value of his basement find is, all hell breaks loose.

I’ve always had a weak spot for old stuff, and bourbon is no exception. Distillers like Drew Kulsveen at Willett in Bardstown, Kentucky, and the Van Winkle family in Frankfort are still bottling high-quality bourbon on a small and delicious scale. But the bourbon that was made between 1935 and 1990 will go down as one of America’s greatest treasures. I’ve tasted a lot of whiskey, new and old, and have always wondered what makes the old stuff superior. Was it the age of the trees that the barrels were made from? The well water? The skill of those master distillers? Was it the lower production? Was the whiskey actually much older than stated on the bottle? I’m not sure. Maybe nostalgia just tastes better.

There are few things that make me happier than opening a bottle of whiskey that has remained sealed for over half a century. It transports you like a time machine—what was the conversation around this bottle in 1950? What were people wearing, and what kind of cars were they driving? What damn war were we in? That whiskey bottle is a piece of living history.

The next time you are at your grandparents’ house, peek around the basement for a nondescript old bottle covered in dust. If you find one, call Husk and ask for me. I’ll buy it from you. Trust me, you don’t want it—it may have gone bad and could be poisonous. I’ll help you out and take it off your hands. 🍷

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*Sean Brock’s cookbook, Heritage, won the IACP Julia Child First Book Award and the James Beard Award for Best Book of the Year in American Cooking.*  
ILLUSTRATION by Devin Cox.

## KEEPERS OF CHIPPED DREAMS

### THE LIFE, DEATH, AND ETERNAL ALLURE OF CERAMIC BOURBON DECANTERS

by Gustavo Arellano

I CALL HIM EZEKIEL, that 1969 Cabin Still ceramic bourbon decanter on my work desk molded in the shape of a stereotypical hillbilly. Bearded, barefoot, and slouching on a barrel, wearing a floppy hat and overalls and holding a shotgun and a whiskey jug, he *looks* like an Ezekiel—which is to say, he’s a dead ringer for my favorite uncle, *mi tío* Ezequiel. A fun-loving guy always up for a nip of white dog (or its Mexican cousin, mezcal), with a great name that somehow never joined Elijah and Ezra in the canon of good, cheap Biblical bourbon.

Ezekiel the Decanter has guarded my office for two years now. I bought him somewhere in Kentucky as part of my pickings from the 127 Yard Sale, that mega-flea market happening the first weekend of every August from Gadsden, Alabama, through Covington, Kentucky. I’ll always keep Ezekiel close to me, not because it cost just \$25 to score him and a two-foot-tall replica statue (*his* name is Enoch—gotta keep up with the Good Book!), but because that’s the summer I decided to collect as many bourbon decanters as possible.

They had intrigued me ever since I saw a 1997 *Simpsons* episode where Marge told a novelty store owner—played by cult director John Waters—that a Confederate soldier statuette owned by her grandmother



was worth a fortune. The store owner pointed out that it was just a whiskey vessel that cost “two books of green stamps, if I’m not mistaken.”

My eighteen-year-old self laughed doubly—at the joke, yes, and at the idea that anyone would ever want to collect such cheesy things. Commemorative china plates, I understood. Porcelain dolls, sure. But bourbon decanters molded in the shape of humans? How *déclassé*. How antiquated. How *Southern*.

Today, I own over forty of them, including decanters in the the form of: The state of Ohio. A train. Legendary thoroughbred Man o’ War. Old cannons. King Kamehameha. The Governor’s Palace in Williamsburg, Virginia. Special editions honoring the 200th anniversary of California’s Catholic mission system, or the Rocky Mountains. Do I have a bottle citing the third running of the Kentucky Pacing Derby at the old Louisville Downs? You know it!

What changed? Well, I’m thirty-six now, so collecting ceramic bourbon decanters (also known as figurals) is a cheaper—and more age-appropriate—hobby than getting into model trains. And it helps that I’m a functioning *borracho* fascinated by bourbon culture. I used to think of these bottles as a punchline. Now, I see them for what they are: keepers of chipped dreams.

They were a national obsession for decades for the Silent Majority, a buttress against Flower Power’s chaos and the materialism of the Me Decade: bought, sold, and traded with the same vigor that people once swapped baseball cards or Beanie Babies. Clubs formed around the passion; newspapers heralded conventions where hobbyists brought their wares for an impressed public to view. Collecting bourbon decanters was a way for working-class folks to feel like they were investing in something tangible that could double as decoration, a marker of a well-kept home.

Today, you can find figurals sold en masse in yard sales or on eBay, most fetching about fifteen bucks. When I buy them along the 127 corridor during the annual yard sale, the vendors always package



them carefully, whether they’re in mint condition or have faded colors or labels. It’s bittersweet for them. They just made a sale, but many start telling me stories about the decanter while searching for newspaper and bubble wrap: how long it was in their family, the fun the bourbon inside inspired. The 1970s and 1980s were the days for decanters; now, they’re disposable, glazed curios of yesteryear.

MANKIND HAS DECORATED its liquor vessels since antiquity. It’s as if there’s something hardwired into our livers that demands festivity at all stages when we drink. Greek and Roman amphorae depicted merry gods; Mayan lords marked their drinking cups with glyphs and scenes from mythology. In the United States, whiskey bottles from the 1800s into World War II often featured etchings or reliefs of Americana or heroes of the time: the Stars and Stripes, bald eagles, George Washington.

Bourbon distillers skipped pomp and circumstance in the early days—a label or the name of the company would do. That changed in the 1940s, when Jim Beam began issuing fancy bottles under its Pin Bottle series, so named because they were molded in the shape of bowling pins. In 1955, for the 160th anniversary of the brand, Beam unveiled a Royal Porcelain Anniversary Bottle, containing hooch aged 160 months. “Beam Bottles were never meant to be concealed,” boasted a 1955 *LIFE* Christmastime ad for the collectible. It featured a man in suit and tie sitting at a table with his hands behind his back, happily gazing at the figurals before him as other presents remained wrapped, already forgotten.

The special edition was the idea of Martin Lewin, a German immigrant who worked with the company as a consultant; corporate lore maintains Lewin thought of the idea as an easy way to sell off overstock bourbon. The Royal Porcelain sold so well that the following year, Lewin unveiled the company’s first truly figural decanter: an elephant-and-donkey set in honor of the 1956 presidential election, designed so that each could hold a drink and serve as an ashtray when laid on its side. I have them both.





An industry was born. Not only did Jim Beam start releasing multiple designs a year, its competitors followed suit. By 1966, the first official Jim Beam decanter club formed in—of all places—Berkeley, California. Lewin, by then Beam’s director, and eventually its president, helped found the International Association of Jim Beam Bottle & Specialties Clubs (IAJBBS) as a way to foster a growing subset of Beam’s consumers. But the bourbon decanter fad didn’t become an American phenomenon until the entrance of Ezra Brooks and its visionary vice-president, Mike Wayne.

Wayne was a bourbon veteran. He joined the industry in 1933 and helped Ezra Brooks enter the figural game in 1967 with a replica flintlock (I own this one, too). In 1969, Wayne issued a decanter in the shape of the eighteen-karat Golden Rooster on display at the Nugget Casino in Sparks, Nevada. Originally priced at \$15, it quickly went for over \$200 within months. Two years later, Wayne attracted national attention after releasing a limited-edition decanter in the shape of a kachina, the ceremonial dolls used by Hopi Indians. The tribe protested, enlisting Arizona senator Barry Goldwater to have Ezra Brooks stop production.

A public relations disaster seemed imminent—“How would a Catholic feel,” the Hopi tribal chairman asked *Time*, “about putting whisky in a statue of Mary?”—and he threatened a lawsuit. Instead, Wayne announced that production of the kachina decanter would end immediately, so that only 2,000 of the original 4,000 run ever appeared. He then arranged for Goldwater to smash the decanter’s original mold, public penance for Jim Beam’s wicked, firewater-loving ways. It was a brilliant publicity coup—a bottle originally priced at \$25 immediately became a rarity and was selling for over \$1,000 within weeks. Wayne never bothered to tell the public that company policy dictated *all* decanter molds be destroyed after their initial run—an easy way to drive up value for collectors.

The two companies invested in factories to mass-produce decanters, creating a china race. Ezra Brooks and Jim Beam supported bottle clubs and Ezra also sponsored a newsletter, *Ezra’s Heritage Gazette*. And while each helped independent authors compile annual guides showcasing decanters, it was Ezra that put out its own publication, *Western Collector’s Handbook and Price Guide to Ezra Brooks Ceramic*

*Decanters*. The booklet showcased Ezra’s figurals and included a directory of clubs, a behind-the-scenes guide that disclosed how the company decided which designs to produce (by a committee of execs who solicited ideas from across the country), and photos taken inside the Heritage China factory. It even reprinted a letter by president Thomas R. O’Shea, outlining his company’s decanter philosophy:

Because of the bottle collector’s support of EZRA BROOKS we are conscious of a moral responsibility which impels us to help improve the hobby of ‘Bottle Collecting’ and to express our profound gratitude toward those people who have chosen to collect our bottles. Therefore...we will never knowingly do anything in the marketing of our ceramic bottles which is not in the best interest of the collector.

REGARDLESS OF PRODUCER, decanter subjects were gloriously square even by 1970s standards. Popular themes included wildlife, famous buildings, homages to states and pioneer days—sometimes lifelike, sometimes not. Wild Turkey featured its namesake bird. Beam and Brooks offered limited-edition bottles to commemorate conventions, liquor stores, college football bowl games, and fraternal organizations. A 1975 Jim Beam release depicted nothing more than a pair of military boots covered by an Army helmet. Titled “Short Timer,” it was the company’s best seller ever, according to the the 1985 *A Guide to Jim Beam Bottles*.

Non-distillers got into the mix, including two enterprises that sold pricier and even more realistic decanters: Lionstone Bourbon and Ski Country. Figurals were a lucrative business—in 1980, the Associated Press caught up with Mike Wayne, by now a Beverly Hills resident who had just dropped a cool \$1 million for the rights to a painting of John Wayne (no relation) that he put on ceramic flasks for his own Mike Wayne Distillery line. “It’s a piece of art,” said Wayne, speaking of the bourbon decanters he helped to popularize. “Something that should last a thousand years if handled properly.”

And as if in answer the Hopi chairman’s question: Wayne went on to produce a twenty-



three-karat-gold-plated amaretto decanter in the image of Blessed Pope John Paul II.

THE DECANTER'S GLORY DAYS ARGUABLY ENDED in the summer of 1987, when the McCormick Distilling Company announced they were releasing their thirty-seventh and final Elvis Presley figural. "We feel we've done our thing with Elvis. He's been good to us," a vice-president told the AP. After more than 120,000 sold, ranging in price from \$65 to \$400, the firm was moving on. So was nearly everyone else.

"There are many reasons it stopped, not just one reason," says Michael Veach, author of *Kentucky Bourbon Whiskey: An American Heritage*. "Decanters are a pain to bottle, so the distilleries were happy to get out of the business. I suspect that when sales improved to a point they no longer needed them to support production, they quit doing it."

Bourbon brands consolidated during the 1980s. As bigger companies swallowed up smaller labels, they left the decanter game for good, along with the institutional support for collectors. The Ezra Brooks clubs are no more; in 2012, Jim Beam released a limited-edition decanter in the shape of its American Stillhouse—its first release in more than a decade. The biggest collector's group remaining is IAJBBS, whose website (with a design out of the Geocities days) boasts seventy-five chapters with about 1,500 members—a far cry from the estimated 10,000 members cited by a *Chicago Tribune* article in 1988. Their forty-fifth annual convention is scheduled for this July at the Sheraton Hotel in Milwaukee. If I can't make this time, I'll definitely try for the next one.

I find it telling that today, the one spirit that carries on the tradition of chintzy bottling is tequila. From bottles shaped like skulls to guns, agave plants, big-breasted women, classy pottery, Aztec emperors, and more, many a middle-class Mexican-American proudly shows off his collection at home, long after the tequila is gone. Like a previous generation of Americans with their bourbon figurals, a tequila decanter is not just a decanter: It's a signifier of culture, a marker of aspirations, a keeper of ambition. And, oh yeah, the booze. 🍷

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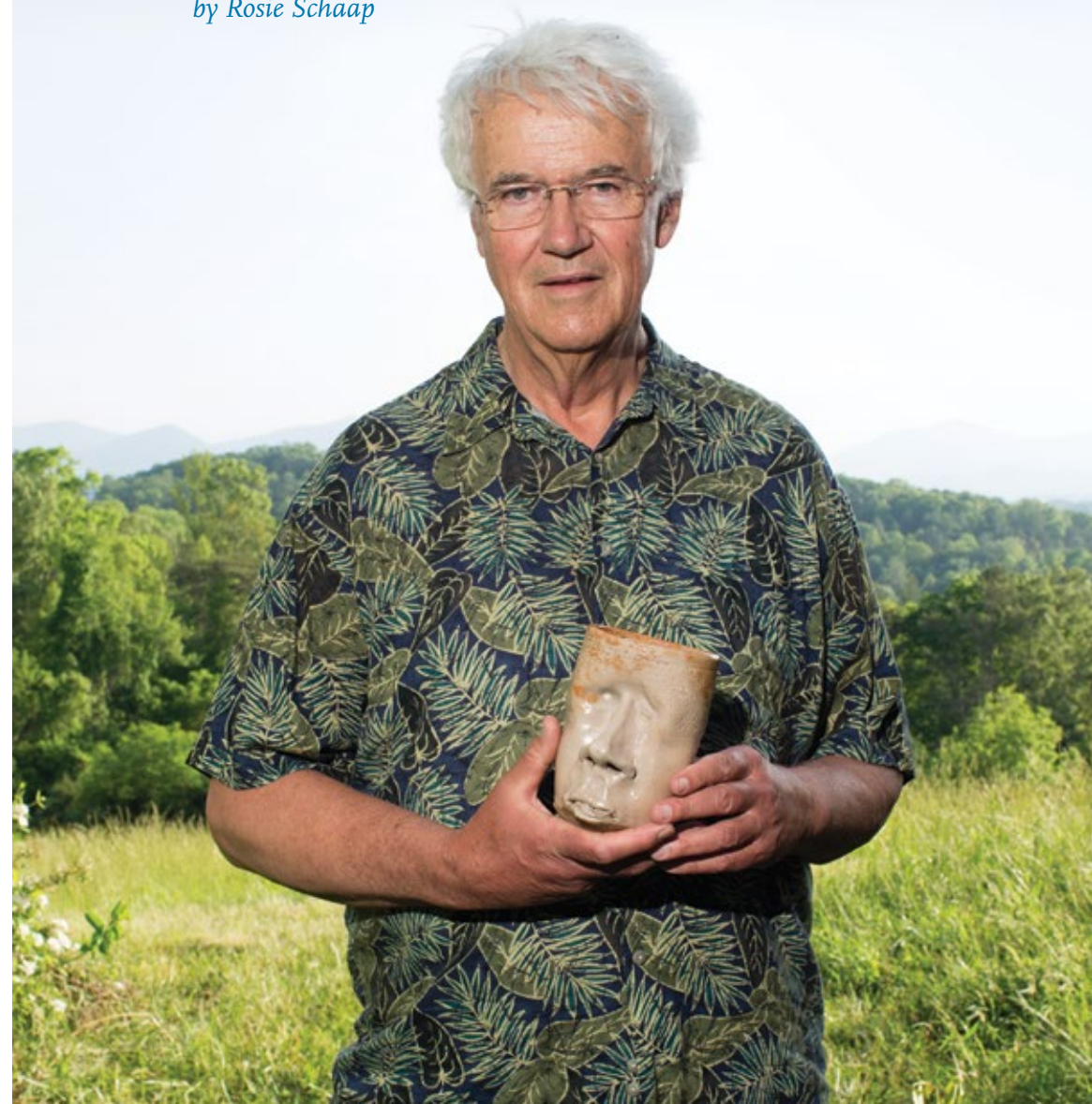
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ILLUSTRATIONS by *Emily Wallace*.

# WEIRD AND WONDERFUL OBJECTS

JIM MCDONOUGH'S  
NORTH CAROLINA TIKI MUGS

by *Rosie Schaap*



THE TIKI MUGS made by Jim McDonough of Asheville, North Carolina, are weird and wonderful objects. They feel good in the hand: They're substantial and heavy, especially when filled with something fruity and rummy and effusively garnished, as they ought to be. Their noses are more pronounced than their traditional, "Polynesian"-style forebears. They frequently look more thoughtful than fearsome—except for the ones with teeth. Those scare the crap out of me.

In one of those rare and delightful *Yay, Internet!* moments, Jim's daughter Jill and her wife, Josey, sent me a nice e-mail after they'd read an essay I wrote years ago for the Poetry Foundation's website. Jill's a poet. Josey's a bartender (I'll get back to that). We quickly became friends, both online and in real life. As our friendship grew, I came to know that Jill grew up in Asheville, and that her father, Jim, was a doctor. But it wasn't until I saw some photos on Facebook that I discovered he was a potter, too.

Jim grew up in rural Illinois and advanced through college in three years, double-majoring in chemistry and biology, before going to medical school at Northwestern. After he and his wife, Judy, married and started their family, they took a long camping trip around the country, determined to find the best place to settle down, the best place to raise their girls and establish Jim's plastic surgery practice. Asheville was it. "I'm sitting on the porch now. It's a pretty nice spot," he said. Jim inclines toward understatement, and this comes through in his ceramics, too. "Looking across, I can see for about twenty miles. Clouds are hanging on top of the mountains." A pause. "I can also see I've got a lot of grass to mow."

His medical practice got busy, and his life as an artist didn't start until the 1990s. Jill was in college and had been taking ceramics classes. Jim was inspired by, and maybe even a little envious of, Jill's ceramics studies. Instead of heading straight to the pottery studio, he sat in on a watercolor class taught by a friend and loved it.



He proceeded to take every two-dimensional art class at the University of North Carolina-Asheville, and then all of the three-dimensional, too. Ceramics really got him. “I found that if I didn’t paint twenty to thirty hours a week, I wasn’t getting better at it. Ceramics insist that you leave and come back. Each part takes some time.”

The rhythms of pottery were a better fit, plus the form offered a kind of community that painting didn’t. “Ceramics is more communal,” Jim said. “Potters always look at the bright side of things. Find a potter, and you’ll find a very supportive person.”

The affinities between plastic surgery and ceramics—especially with tikis, which depict human-ish faces—seemed almost too obvious to ask him about, but I did, anyway. “There’s a lot of overlap in anatomy. When you do rhinoplasty, you make a nose. On these mugs, I make a nose. But with the mug it’s easier: You can make bad noses, and that’s fun to do. And the mug doesn’t bleed.”

JILL’S WIFE, JOSEY, works at the excellent Boston cocktail spot Drink. She’s one of the best bartenders I know. A few years ago, she was tinkering with tiki drink recipes, and her father-in-law started making vessels for such drinks. “I was experimenting with cylinders, and wanted to make faces. Sure enough, they looked liked something from the South Sea Islands,” Jim recalled.

Jim’s tiki mugs, formed from Cone-10 stoneware clay from Asheville’s Highwater Clays and generally Shino glazed, turned out different from the familiar vessels popularized in the 1960s by Don the Beachcomber and Trader Vic’s. Anyone with even a passing knowledge of the pottery of the American South instantly apprehends that Jim’s tiki mugs are also indebted to the tradition of face jugs, those robustly expressive—and sometimes frightening—pots produced throughout the region. He acknowledges their influence, but his approach is more gestural: A couple of deep impressions make for sunken eyes. A nose is more assertively formed. Sometimes, there are terrible teeth.

Josey, who uses Jim’s mugs at Drink, encourages her bar patrons to experience their strange beauty fully. “When I bring one out, I always keep the face turned away from my guest until the moment I’m serving the drink,” she said. “I carry it with my hands obscuring the features and then I reveal it all at once, spinning the mug as I place it on the cocktail napkin so it’s facing my guest. They exclaim with delight and surprise.

I take particular pleasure in encouraging them to place their thumbs in the eye sockets, to imagine Jim doing that very thing with his own thumbs in wet clay, before adding the features that interest him: nose, philtrum, and lips.”

Although the production of face jugs in the South likely goes back to the middle of the nineteenth century, John Burrison, the director of the folklore curriculum at Georgia State University, told me, “a significant tradition of making face jugs in North Carolina did not develop until the 1920s or 1930s.” The pieces became popular among tourists.

The true heyday of face jugs, like tikis, commenced in the 1960s. Charles “Terry” Zug III, a professor emeritus of folklore and English literature at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill and the author of *Turners and Burners: The Folk Potters of North Carolina*, identifies Lanier Meaders of Cleveland, Georgia, and Burlon Craig of Vale, North Carolina, as the movement’s major figures. But, Zug writes, “For all the recognition they received, neither man liked making faces but accepted what the market demanded.” The original purposes and meanings of face jugs are uncertain, but Zug argues that the extra effort required to make them suggests that they were “special, out of the ordinary to the potters.” Instead of being prized for any particular utilitarian value, they were often presentation pieces, sometimes commemorative.

Market demands aren’t as much of a burden for Jim McDonough, who likes making his tikis and is happy to sell them via an Etsy shop he shares with his daughter Susan, a jewelry maker. His drink of choice is usually water, but he admits to enjoying every cocktail ever made for him by Josey, who recommends using the mugs for Singapore Slings and Jungle Birds. He still works about fifty hours a week as a doctor. And spends about twenty in the ceramics studio with his fellow art students, often much younger than himself, and their professor, Megan Wolfe. “It’s a good balance,” he told me—adding that Judy’s not so sure about that. “And then there’s that grass to mow.” 🍷

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PHOTOS by Chris Fowler.

HOME COOKING

# IT WAS ALWAYS TIME TO EAT

MISS DONNA NEVER MADE ME FEEL  
LIKE AN OUTSIDER

by Von Diaz



MY FIRST BRUSH WITH CHEESE GRITS was nearly my last.

That morning, my parents dropped me off, half-asleep and grumpy, at the La Petite daycare in Mt. Zion, Georgia. A teacher sat me down at a long table with a dozen other preschoolers and served me a plastic bowl of white, wiggly mush with an orangey-yellow cheese square melted on top.

I was six years old, the only Latina in my class. Breakfast at home wasn't particularly Latino—I was a connoisseur of Trix cereal and strawberry Quik at the time. I poked at the wiggle with the edge of my spoon to investigate. I frowned. A teacher noticed and exclaimed, "What? You don't like guh-ree-its?!"

"Nuh-uh!" I said, frowning and shaking my head.

"Well you'll just have to go hungry, because that's what we got," she said, fist pressed firmly against her hip.

I surrendered and scooped a bit of the cheese square and mush out of the bowl, letting it slide off the spoon into my mouth. My disgusted expression brought on more giggles and snickers from teachers and other kids—many wondering aloud what on earth my parents fed me at home. Humiliated and nauseous, I quit eating and went hungry for the rest of the day.

This was my first foray into (bad) Southern food, and for most of my early childhood it impacted how I ate. And so it went until I ate grits done right by a sweet mama who showed me just how good the food of my new home could be.

I WAS BORN IN RIO PIEDRAS, PUERTO RICO, to twenty-year-old college students. My dad was studying accounting, my mom, landscape architecture. They tried to pursue their studies and raise a tiny baby, but my dad ultimately went the way of so many other young fathers with mouths to feed: He joined the Army.

My first home on the U.S. mainland was Fort Gillem, a small Army base just south of Atlanta. Our neighborhood in suburban Forest Park was made up of identical brick townhouses with white doors and trim, with playgrounds of rusting metal and slides that burned your thighs in the summertime. I learned to swim on that base, when Sergeant Swim-Instructor threw me in the deep end and told me to get to the top. I lost my first tooth on-base, when I tripped and fell on aluminum bleachers during a baseball game.

We had a small Puerto Rican enclave there. The kids ran around past dark, rolling in our Fisher Price cars and catching lightning bugs. Our families cooked out on the weekends, making arroz con gandules (rice with pigeon peas) and costillas (pork ribs marinated in adobo). These events—where our parents danced salsa, drank rum, and spoke Spanish rapidly—were how they stayed connected to the island. My friends and I just ate our fill and began refusing to speak Spanish. During the summer the nights were hot, just like in Puerto Rico. We would sit outside long after our bedtime, waiting for our drunk parents to take us home.

The first Southern foods I ever ate were in daycare and public-school cafeterias—lima beans, fried okra, and peach cobbler. That's also where I had Frito pie and Mexican pizza. A classmate once asked me if that's what my mom cooked, and I stuck my tongue out at him. At home, Mami never cooked anything remotely like these foods. Nothing was as offensive to her as collard greens, which she thought smelled like toilet. Cornbread was too dry, fried chicken too greasy, biscuits and gravy too *baboso*, or snot-like.

My mother was a secret vegetarian. When she was growing up in Puerto Rico, my grandmother Tata cooked everything from scratch with lots of love and lard. That meant Mami often came home from school to a giant beef tongue in her sink, or a pot of stewed pig's feet and garbanzos on the stove. All she wanted was fresh greens. Instead, she got vegetables stewed to smithereens in pork fat.



I realize now it wasn't just that Mami thought Southern food was nasty and smelly. This way of eating, the pigs' feet and smothered greens, was part of her past, and she wanted a better future for me. Mami mostly fed us simple American foods like baked chicken and veggies—made Puerto Rican with adobo seasoning, or Puerto Rican foods such as picadillo—lightened up by substituting ground turkey for beef. But for me there was always something lacking in her cooking.

Every once in a while, the lunch ladies would get it right. I'd go through the line and smile as they served me a pulled pork sandwich with pickles on a soft white bun, and coleslaw that was still crunchy. By then, I could tell the difference between those stale daycare grits and food made with care.

I got curious. The greens braised in broth and ham hocks, fluffy biscuits in peppery white gravy, yellow layer cake slathered in chocolate buttercream: These were my dream foods. But because my mom wasn't down, they were out of reach. Except when I went to the home of Arica Slaughter, my childhood best friend.

The Slaughters lived in Rex, the next suburb over from us, in one of those nice neighborhoods with a name. It had houses with two-car garages, long driveways, brick mailboxes, and flowerbeds. Their house was in a cul-de-sac, and their yard stretched an acre, bordered by a small creek, a line of pollen-y pine trees, and a chain-link pen where Bosh, the Slaughter's Doberman, lived. The house had three bedrooms, a den *and* a living room, and a kitchen with a giant sink, a double-wide stove, and one of those big refrigerators that opened like French doors.

Arica's mother, Miss Donna, was a skinny white lady from Tennessee with graying sandy-blonde hair, a pointed face punctuated by a delicate nose, and bright blue eyes. She wore gold-rimmed bifocals and dressed in sweatpants, button-down men's collared shirts, and slip-on shoes.

Miss Donna spent her days watching daytime TV, smoking cigarettes, drinking gin and tonics, and cooking. She was fascinated that I'd never had foods that were everyday to her, like hoecakes with corn syrup, chitterlings with hot sauce, and black-eyed peas. Anytime she learned that I hadn't eaten a certain food, she'd cook it for me immediately.

Miss Donna never made me feel like an outsider. Other adults asked me questions like: What does your name mean? How spicy is your mom's cooking? Do your parents speak English? These questions

made me feel as though I couldn't fit their idea of Latina, nor did I quite belong in the South.

Arica's house was a sanctuary. My parents were in the throes of a divorce. They were either in a fight, or my dad just wasn't around. But Miss Donna always greeted me at the sliding glass door with the biggest hug, clutching the back of my head and pulling me close to her chest.

When she called us in from the yard, where we were either digging something up or jumping on the trampoline, her cigarette-strained voice would crack.

"Aarica, Von Marieeee, time to eat!"

At Miss Donna's house, it was always time to eat. Her cabinets buckled with name-brand snacks—the kind my parents could never afford: Nabisco, Keebler, Lay's, Aunt Jemima, Kellogg's. She kept three extra freezers on the back porch, equally packed with steaks, roasts, whole chickens, gallons of milk—abundance in response to the profound poverty Arica's dad had grown up with.

Benjamin Slaughter, or Mr. Benny, was a six-foot-tall black man built like a football player, with a lazy eye he'd gotten after one of his brothers accidentally hit him in the back of the head with a mace. His eyeball had popped out of the socket, and his mom had pushed it back in with Vaseline.



Some days I'd come in from playing outside, sweaty, my hair full of pine straw from rolling down hills, shoes filthy from mucking around in the creek, and find Miss Donna sitting at the table staring at the wall, cigarette in hand, another gin and tonic in front of her in a rocks glass beaded with condensation.

"You alright, Miss Donna?" I'd ask.

She'd look over, sadly. "Yeah baby. You hungry?"

She never went back to Tennessee after marrying Mr. Benny. She had been his secretary at the construction company he founded and ran. Benny worshipped Miss Donna, and Miss Donna adored him. He'd come in late from work, quiet and reserved, and in his deep, gentle voice, he'd say, "Good evening, Miss Donna." "Good evening, Mr. Benny," she'd reply, looking back at him over the top of her glasses. I never saw them kiss, or even embrace. But when Mr. Benny was home, he and Miss Donna sat side by side.

Her father disowned her when she married Benny. A strong believer in the teachings of the Klan, he never forgave Donna for marrying a black man. Arica was born two months premature. Miss Donna said she was the size of a Barbie doll; small enough to fit in a shoebox. Two years later, Arica's older sister, Stacey, died in a car accident on a rainy morning. Stacey was twenty years old. Somewhere in her mind, Donna always wondered if her father had cursed her. After he passed away, she said she could feel his presence roaming the house, holding on strong to his hate, but never able to let her go.

When I was twelve, Miss Donna had a heart attack and died suddenly of multiple organ failure. They suspected that her heavy drinking was to blame, that she also might have had colon cancer. It was my first funeral, and I went dressed in an oversized Tweety Bird T-shirt and black leggings.

"Are you sure you want to wear that?" Mami asked, one eyebrow raised.

I didn't know what else to wear. When I got to the church, I couldn't speak to Arica or Mr. Benny. I sat in the back with my mom and stared at Miss Donna's face peeking out of her casket. People hugged and cried, a pastor led the group in song. We left fifteen minutes later. Arica and I were never the same. I didn't comfort her, as a friend should have. And I never went back to that house. Arica was my best friend, but maybe I was visiting Miss Donna all along.

I THINK OF HER OFTEN: when I see a Doberman, or drink a gin and tonic, and especially when I make grits. I once told her the story of the La Petite grits. She listened intently, brow furrowed, and quickly went to work to replace that bad memory. I watched as she warmed water and milk in a saucepan and slowly poured in white corn grits, stirring and simmering until they thickened and sputtered. She filled three bowls halfway and sat

them down in front of me along with a jar of grape jelly (Arica's favorite), a stick of butter, a bowl of sugar, and salt and pepper.

I wish I could say that they were amazing, and that my obsession with grits started that day. Instead, we scooped three mostly uneaten bowls of grits into the trash. Perhaps it was the memory of those first grits: I still didn't like them. Miss Donna didn't give up. We tried maple syrup, strawberry jam, Tabasco...and ultimately hit a sweet spot with cheddar cheese and lots of pepper.

Today, when I make cheese grits, I use half-and-half, sharp white cheddar, and Parmesan. I often serve them with sautéed greens, hot sauce, and a poached egg. On my wedding day, we had a grits bar with a dozen or so toppings—including scallions, tomatoes, crumbled bacon, cheddar, and pernil (Puerto Rican roast pork shoulder).

Miss Donna always seemed to understand that I needed to be coaxed and prodded, guided slowly, and given a chance to adjust my tastes to match my tastebuds and my background. She helped me find my home in the South. 🍷

Von Diaz is a food writer and radio producer who explores Puerto Rican food, culture, and identity through memoir and multimedia. This piece is adapted from her forthcoming cookbook, *Gordita: Craving Puerto Rico*.

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## ABOUT GRAVY

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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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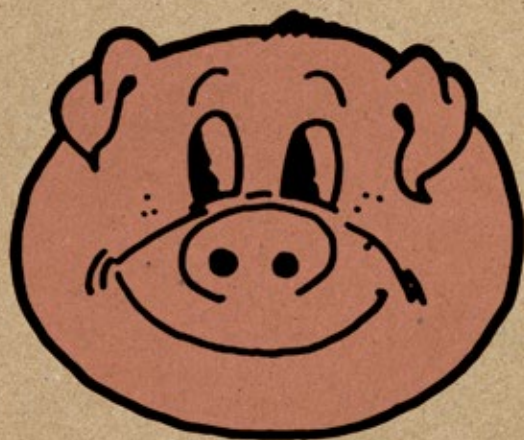
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