GRAVY

$7 • SUMMER 2016 • A QUARTE SOUTHERN FOODWAYS ALLIANCE

Southern Foodways Alliance

Sara Wood

ISSUE #60
SUMMER 2016

GRAVY

THE SFA SERVES YOU...

Cover photo by
WHITNEY OTT

First Helpings

Andrew Thomas Lee

SUMMER AT THE SFA

People often ask me if the Southern Foodways Alliance, like the University of Mississippi and the town of Oxford, slows down for the summer. It's not polite to laugh in someone's face, but that would be an accurate response. The truth is, we pack our summers just as full as the rest of the year.

By the time you read these words, we will have just wrapped up our Summer Symposium in Nashville. Our minds and stomachs will be full of the stories and tastes of the Music City, from hot chicken to Kurdish flatbread.

For SFA oral historian Sara Wood, July means the annual oral history workshop, where we share our mission and methods with a new class of documentarians. And by early August, our Fall Symposium is fully programmed, and tickets go on sale.

This summer we've got another project in the works: *The Southern Foodways Alliance Guide to Cocktails*. Our partner in this volume, which UGA Press will publish in 2017, is Jerry Slater. Jerry manned the bar at Louisville's Seelbach Hilton before moving to Atlanta in 2008. He kept harried travelers lubricated at Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport's One Flew South, then opened H. Harper Station in a former train depot in the Reynoldstown neighborhood. Jerry can expound on our region's cocktail history as gracefully as he can mix a perfectly balanced original creation. We're lucky to have him on board.

And now, while you're enjoying this issue of *Gravy*, excuse me while I turn back to edit that cocktail book! —*SCM*

Mark Geil

Featured Contributor

JULIAN RANKIN

So, Julian, tell us a bit about yourself.

I'm a writer and photographer raised in Mississippi and North Carolina. My work explores identity and personal history with a focus on the American South. Currently I serve as the director of marketing and communications at the Mississippi Museum of Art in Jackson.

I'm husband to an amazing Oxford, Mississippi, girl, and father to a two-year-old son called Possum.

What drew you to telling the story of Ed Scott Jr., the first black man to farm and process catfish in the Mississippi Delta?

I didn't exactly discover the story of Ed Scott. It presented itself, as many stories do, as a narrative itching for an expansive telling. Scott's daughter Willena White is the keeper of the family's historical legacy. When I heard through colleagues about her interest in sharing her father's story, I initiated a meeting at her home in the Mississippi Delta town of Renova.

During this spring 2013 visit, I spoke with a ninety-one-year-old Scott. In raspy, nearly inaudible sequences—which I would become accustomed to deciphering in the months to follow—Scott poured out the contents of his life.

He told me about his early years watching his father escape the economic bondage of sharecropping for the uncertainty of entrepreneurship; his lack of formal schooling as a child and the lessons of the land; his service under General Patton on the Western Front in World War II; his return home to take over and expand the family's unlikely agriculture empire; and his decision to dig up his fields in the 1980s to start farming catfish. The rest, as they say, is oral history.

TIP No. 60

Tickets for our Fall Symposium (Oct. 13–16) go on sale in early August. Be sure your SFA membership is current if you plan to purchase a ticket!

IRA WALLACE: WRITER, SEED SAVER, EDUCATOR

Sara Wood

IRA WALLACE IS A SEED SAVER, an educator, and the essential intellectual and physical energy behind Southern Exposure Seed Exchange—one of the country's best known and most respected sources for heirloom and open-pollinated seeds.

Raised by her grandmother in Tampa, Florida, Wallace developed a love of gardening. Under her grandmother's tutelage, she grew mango, avocado, pecan, and soursop trees; tended an enormous garden; and raised chickens. At New College in Sarasota, Florida, in the 1960s, Wallace designed her own major and dug deep into the philosophy and practice of cooperative education and living.

Ms. Wallace traveled the world, exploring organic agriculture, seed saving, and cooperative living. In the 1980s, she joined the Twin Oaks Community in Louisa, Virginia. Nearly 100 folks who value cooperation, sharing, nonviolence, equality, and ecology call Twin Oaks home.

These days, Wallace splits her time between Twin Oaks and Acorn, the Mineral, Virginia, community she helped to found in the 1990s.

Acorn Community Farm is an anarchist, egalitarian community committed to income-sharing, sustainable living, and creating a vibrant, eclectic culture. The Southern Exposure Seed Exchange is Acorn's sustaining enterprise.

Ira Wallace is the founder of the Heritage Harvest Festival, held each fall at Monticello. She presents at sustainable agriculture conferences across the region, and she is the author of *The Timber Press Guide to Vegetable Gardening in the Southeast*.

You'll be hearing more about Wallace from the SFA in the months to come.

SFA SEED SAVING

BIRDS DO IT. SQUIRRELS DO IT. LET'S DO IT. LET'S SAVE SOME SEEDS.
TO ENSURE SUCCESS, START WITH PLANTS GROWN FROM OPEN-POLINATED SEEDS.

TOMATO

All it takes to save tomato seed is a ripe tomato, some time, and a somewhat suppressed sense of smell.

Squeeze the pulp and seeds from a ripe tomato into an open container. Let the mixture sit and ferment for at least 4 days. (It will get stinky!) Drain off the liquid and the solids that floated to the top. Spread the remaining seed on a plate to dry completely.

BEANS

Leave in the field until pods are papery and dry. Harvest by pulling up the entire plant. Lay it on a tarp or hang in a dry place until the seed is completely dry. Not sure if the beans are dry enough? Try to press the seed with your fingernail. If the beans are ready to become seed then your nail won't leave an indentation. Shell each pod by hand then clean.

CORN

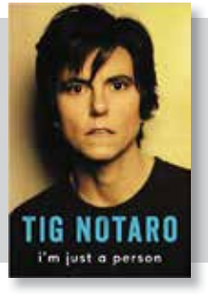
Allow the ears of corn to dry on the plant and harvest when husks are dry and papery. Once harvested, shuck and dry again indoors for 3 to 6 months. Remove any discolored kernels (toss any totally or mostly discolored cobs).

Shell over a large bowl, holding the cob with one hand and twisting with the other to remove the kernels (they'll be very wrinkled). Continue twisting until all the kernels have fallen into the bowl. Store in a rodent-proof container. Remember, humans aren't the only species crazy for corn.

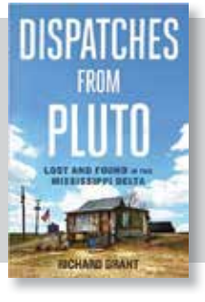
GRAVY BOOK CLUB

SFA staffers read more than food books. In this space, we share our favorites. Blog editor Jenna Mason offers this issue's recommendations.

WHERE'D YOU GO, BERNADETTE?
by Maria Semple
Fifteen-year-old Bee Branch compiles every piece of evidence she can find—e-mails, invoices, transcripts, news clippings—to track down her mother, who has vanished after an apparent breakdown.



I'M JUST A PERSON
by Tig Notaro
Mississippi native Tig Notaro endures a dangerous illness, the sudden death of her mother, a breakup, and a cancer diagnosis with honesty and humor.



DISPATCHES FROM PLUTO: LOST AND FOUND IN THE MISSISSIPPI DELTA
by Richard Grant
On a whim, writer Richard Grant moves with his girlfriend from their New York City apartment to an old plantation house in the Mississippi Delta.

CORN: THE ETERNAL MEXICAN

A FIELD GUIDE TO SNACKING

by Gustavo Arellano

Corn was the original Mexican migrant to the South.

At some point millennia ago, maize took a miraculous journey from its birthplace in the southern Mexican highlands (where the ancients domesticated it from its wild ancestor, teosinte) through the mountains and deserts to the modern-day Southwest. From there, corn made its way to the South. The Cherokee Nation says it has harvested corn since 1,000 B.C.E., and each tribe tells an origin story of how corn came to them. Almost universally, those narratives center on a supernatural spirit or god who gave people the crop as a gift. Giving and receiving so that everyone benefits: That's immigration at its best.

Corn still possesses that power to tell the story of a people. Even when rendered as snacks. *Especially* when eaten as snacks. Documenting the corn snacks that Mexicans in the South consume is like an making an edible map of the region's varied Mexican populations. Traveling the South in recent years, I've catalogued and enjoyed a wide range of corn-based *antojitos*. I see more and more popping up every *año*. If you want to follow my trail of tortilla chips, start here.

Atole and champurrado: These primordial hot drinks are weekend staples of Mexican eateries across *el Sur*. Much like moonshine and whiskey, save the alcohol, atole and champurrado are mother and daughter. Atole is made by boiling masa down with water, tossing in cinnamon, piloncillo (unrefined brown sugar), and vanilla to taste. Champurrado adds chocolate, preferably Ibarra over Nestlé Abuelita. Both achieve the same

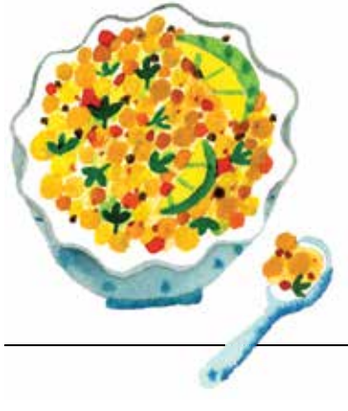
result: piping-hot and comforting, sweet and savory, the best weapon against the cold outside of a tiger-emblazoned blanket, which every Mexican household in the Southwest owns for both warmth and kitsch value. Are those in the South yet?

Elotes: Southerners eat corn on the cob; we have elotes. *Eloteros*—literally, "corn men"—roam barrios across the country, pushing

Illustrations by Haejin Park

carts laden with grilled and steamed ears, which they slather with mayo, chile powder, butter, and lemon. Pardon the cultural superiority, but no one knows how to prepare corn on the cob the way we do: The results are luscious, filling, messy, beautiful. *Eloteros* hail their presence with bicycle horns (if you hear bells, that's going to be the Mexican ice cream man—a lesson for another column). Spanish tip: Say "*¿Me da un picadiente, por favor?*" when you realize you need a toothpick.

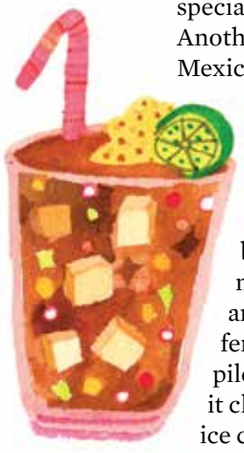
Esquites: Related to elotes are esquites, a corn-based dish that's virtually unchanged since the time of the Aztecs. Served in a cup instead of on the cob, it's



made with roasted kernels, onions, butter, and epazote (a Mexican herb as renowned for its pungent taste as its powers to reduce flatulence—I'm here all week, folks). Good esquites are notoriously difficult to make. Make them poorly, and you have mush; make them perfectly, and each kernel is a juicy jewel floating in a buttery broth. The trick is to roast the kernels long enough so that they're almost pebbly. They will plump in the broth and retain a slight crunch. Given many Mexican immigrants to the South come from Mexico's southern states, whereas esquites are mostly a central Mexican delicacy, feel blessed if you find them near you.

Tamales: While Delta-style tamales have enlivened the Southern diet since the late 1800s, Mexican migration is so persistent that regional tamale variations are now available north of the border. Tamales wrapped in banana leaves telegraph a southern Mexican provenance; the best of those are tamales de mole negro, featuring chicken and a chocolate-based mole. Corundas are

inside-out tamales: triangles of masa topped with strands of chicken or pork and sour cream. My favorites are uchepos, tiny dessert tamales made of tender sweet corn and milk that hail from the central Mexican state of Michoacán. I've only eaten these special tamales at house parties. Another reason to befriend the Mexicans in your town.



Tejuino: If you find this agua fresca, congrats: You have in your midst people from Colima or Jalisco, birthplace of tequila and mariachi. Tejuino starts as an atole. Cooks let the drink ferment, cut the results with piloncillo and salt, then serve it chilled with a scoop of lime ice cream. Ever tasted kombucha? It's like that, except better: funky, tangy, irresistibly sweet. Jaliscan food has become trendy among Mexican Americans in the past couple of years, so look for tejuino in fancier Mexican restaurants or forward-looking bars.

Takis: Mexicans love their *antojitos*. The more processed, the better. Takis are essentially the mestizo child of Fritos and Cheetos, but with more spice, tang, and bite. These should definitely be at your local *mercado*, neighborhood convenience store, or Piggly Wiggly. If not, do yourself a favor and demand them.

Each of these snacks is built on a base of masa.
By treating raw corn kernels in an alkaline solution, Mexican cooks simultaneously leeched off the toxins while adding nutrients like niacin. That's why we ate a corn-based diet but didn't suffer from the pellagra that historically plagued the U.S. South. Speaking of masa, stay away from the dried stuff called masa harina. It produces tortillas that taste like dust. Instead, look for tortillerías that grind their own masa, often from local corn. Tortillería y Taquería Ramirez in Lexington, Kentucky, for instance, gets its corn from the Bluegrass State's famous Weisenburger Mill, resulting in hefty tortillas that taste and smell earthy and don't tear easily—as *bueno* as any I've eaten in California.

Gustavo Arellano is editor of OC Weekly *in Orange County, California, and author of* Taco USA: How Mexican Food Conquered America.

Denny Culbert

DODGY ETYMOLOGIES

WHO'S HUSHING THAT PUPPY?

by Allison Burkette

Among the "swarm of neologisms" noted by H.L. Mencken in his 1921 book *The American Language* are a plethora of corn-related compounds: *hoe-cake*, *Johnny-cake*, *corn-dodger*, *roasting-ear*, *corn-crib*, *corn-cob*, and *pop-corn*. Of these, "corn dodger" reveals the most colorful etymologies. One exposition harkens to the colonial perception that cornmeal was a hardship substitution for wheat flour. A baker of that era was thought a "dodger" if she used cornmeal instead of fancier and more expensive wheat flour. Sylva Clapin offered a

more literal interpretation of the origins of "dodger." In his 1902 *New Dictionary of Americanisms*, he described the manner in which cooks "toss a mass of dough rapidly from hand to hand to give it shape" or the way a corn dumpling "dodges up and down in boiling."

The back-and-forth motion of this small bread's preparation could have given rise (pun intended) to its name. But the most likely etymological possibility is that "dodger" comes from the Scots word *dadge*, which means "a large piece of anything,"[1] and its diminutive form, *dodgel*, "a lump of something." The *Dictionary of the Scots Language* contains an 1825 reference to "a dodgel o' bannock." Given that "bannock" was also a word used in the Eastern states for cornbread, and given the extent of Scottish settlement in Appalachia, this seems a less dodgy explanation of why the term "corn-dodger" was applied to a lump of bread made from cornmeal.

"Hushpuppy," a related term, appears in print in 1918. Though its origins are also unclear, one theory is more pervasive than others: The hushpuppy originated as a scrap of cornmeal dough, fried quickly and fed to dogs to silence whining or begging. The identity of the puppy-hushers varies. Folk tales range from Confederate soldiers, to runaway slaves, to hunters, to beach-front partygoers. Another theory suggests that the "hush" part of hushpuppy developed from "hash," from the French *hache*, "to cut into small pieces for cooking." Yet another theory, from the 1977 *Morris Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins*, holds that the name "hushpuppy" dervies from the water dog or mudpuppy, a salamander legendary for its size and ill temper. The mudpuppy would be considered desperate food; including "hush" in the name for cornmeal-and-salamander makes sense—you certainly wouldn't want your neighbors to know you ate it.

Though none of these folk etymologies are likely accurate, they make for good stories. And they are more than just tall tales: Folk etymologies encode cultural information in their explanations of our linguistic world—the fanciful accounts of *corn dodger* and *hushpuppy* show us, for example, that attitudes toward cornmeal have changed. The bread flour that colonists initially regarded as uncooperative has become a touchstone of Southern cuisine. The variety of names for cornmeal-based breads speaks to that status. In the end, the best explanation for these two terms is the one that neither story-tellers nor linguists are willing to offer: Sometimes we just don't know.

[1] **Do refrain from using this label for people, as the DSL notes that 'dadge' can also be used in Scots to mean something akin to "tramp" or "slut" in English.**

Allison Burkette is an associate professor of linguistics at the University of Mississippi. Her latest book is Language and Material Culture.

FEAST OR FAMINE

CORN'S ROLE IN AMERICA'S (PRE)HISTORY

by Tanya M. Peres

Xunantunich/Adobe Stock

CHARLES FAIRBANKS and his Florida State University student archeology crew meticulously scraped dirt from their excavation units for weeks. It was 1961. They had broken ground in June at Horseshoe Bend National Battlefield Park in central Alabama to search for Nuyaka, a historic Muscogee (Creek) Indian village on the Tallapoosa River. They had cleared a wading pool–sized circular stain of dark brown, almost greasy dirt. Nearly three hundred years prior, native peoples had filled this earthen storage pit with broken bones of deer and turtles, pulverized and carbonized hickory nut shells, peach pits, broken ceramic pots, and flecks of charcoal from cooking fires. As the crew scooped the remnants of these long-forgotten meals, Fairbanks squinted, peering from the edge of the unit. A white speck caught his eye. He stepped into the pit, moving gingerly. The students paused, fixing attention on their professor.

Fairbanks pulled a trowel with a worn wooden handle from his back pocket. He knelt on the smooth floor of the excavation unit. With a wrist flick he uncovered several cracked white eggshells. The closest student held a small glass jar, ready to pack the specimens for a trip back to the lab in Tallahassee. The rest of the crew laid down their shovels and

rulers and headed over to see what else they might find. They were not disappointed. Following Fairbanks's lead, scraping carefully, they uncovered more eggshell pieces and a remarkably well-preserved egg. In an adjacent pit, they found burned corncobs.

The students spent the rest of the day in deep discussion about the ancient meal these small artifacts narrated. Fairbanks, drawing on his Philip Morris Commander cigarette and on his vast knowledge of Native American lifeways, may have declared it the first known evidence of sofki eaten with custake, a combination we know today as grits and eggs. Prior to the arrival of chickens, which European settlers brought to North America, the Muscogee and other groups before them ate their sofki with turkey or duck eggs.

No matter which bird bore the eggs, the preparation of the sofki was constant. Through a process that would come to be known as nixtamalization, Muscogee cooks soaked corn kernels in hardwood ash and water before cooking the rinsed and softened kernels in a ceramic vessel until they reached the consistency of gruel. In a step not unlike adding butter or sausage gravy to the modern version of grits, they also added crushed hickory nuts, hickory nut oil, or deer-bone marrow. Topped with an egg, this mix became a satisfying and nutritious meal.

Native Americans memorialized and celebrated the prominent role of corn in their lives through stories passed from grandmothers to granddaughters, in meals cooked around clan fires, through male voices raised in song, and in the rattle-shaking of female stomp dances. When the ripening moon showed on sultry late-summer nights and silky hairs entwined milk-laden corn kernels, the Southeastern Indians began to prepare for the Green Corn Ceremony. It was a time to cleanse bodies through fasting, mend relationships through forgiveness, and revive souls through feasting. Busk, the name given to the ceremony by early European settlers, was an Anglicized version of the Creek *poskita*, meaning "to fast." The first day of the ceremony was spent feasting on the remainder of the winter food stores in preparation for the days of fasting to follow.

Fasting began at sundown on the first day and was broken at sunrise on the third day, when priests, warriors, and clan leaders purified themselves by drinking a native tea. On the fourth day, the women prepared an elaborate feast of corn, pumpkin, beans, fish, dried meat, and wild fruit. As anthropologist Charles Hudson has noted, the ceremony was of such deep social, spiritual, and cultural meaning that to approximate it in the modern day would be to roll Thanksgiving, New Year's, Yom Kippur, Lent, and Mardi Gras into one feast celebration.

European explorers and Euro-

Print by James Hall and Thomas Loraine McKenney, 1837. Library of Congress

Courtesy of Kathleen Deagan

Charles Fairbanks with Rochelle Marrinan, circa 1971. Marrinan is the current chair of anthropology at FSU.

American settlers observed and chronicled these events. Benjamin Hawkins, U.S. Indian Agent from 1796 to 1816, recorded details of the multi-day festivities. John Howard Payne visited the Creek in 1835 and described the ceremony in a letter to a relative in New York. Payne noted that the Creek did not eat the newly ripe corn until after the busk was complete, a period of four days. Payne could not have known it at the time, but he witnessed the last Creek busk celebrated on ancestral homelands east of Arkansas. The next year, armies under the control of President Andrew Jackson began forcibly removing the Creek and other Southeastern Indians to what is now eastern Oklahoma. Despite the physical separation from their ancestral homelands, the Creek still celebrate busks today. That continuity speaks to the importance of the ritual for Southeastern Native American groups seeking spiritual and social renewal.

European contact brought cultural, economic, and social change to the Muscogee living at Nuyaka. Muscogee women and English traders married and raised families nearby; their children lived in both worlds. Between 1715 and the 1780s, the Muscogee traded deerskins for English textiles, cookware, guns, and alcohol. By the 1730s, tens of thousands of deerskins passed annually through Charleston, South Carolina, the closest major port for the deerskin trade to Europe. Demand for hides eventually decimated the white-tailed deer population and strained trade relations between the Muscogee and the leaders of the newly formed state of Georgia. No longer seen as valuable sources of a commodity, Muscogee hunters became hurdles to plantation-based farming and slavery. The Georgia government pressured the Indians into signing over their lands in a series of treaties between 1790 and 1805. During this era, U.S. Indian Agent Benjamin Hawkins led the federal government's "plan of civilization" to convert Muscogee men into commercial ranchers and farmers. Planners ignored the fact that Creek *women* traditionally farmed the land.

The devastating loss of traditional lifeways spurred a rift between the Creek National Council, which aligned with the U.S. Government, and the traditionalist Red Sticks, who saw these assimilation attempts as death sentences. Diplomacy fizzled, erupting into violence in 1813. Fighting between the two Creek groups intensified with the engagement of U.S. troops, who joined forces with the Creek National Council to crush the Red Sticks.

On March 27, 1814, the town of Tohopeka became the site of the bloodiest battle of the campaign. Led by Chief Menawa, Creek warriors, women, and children from surrounding towns, including Nuyaka, had sought refuge in this naturally defensible location on a horseshoe-shaped bend in the Tallapoosa River. Within eight hours, General Andrew Jackson's army slaughtered more than 800 Muscogee men.

According to a battle map that Isaac Stephens, a member of the Sons of Tennessee militia, sent to his uncle in Virginia, the U.S. troops surrounded the 100-acre Creek town. Written documents of the day do not number the women and children killed in those chaotic terror-filled hours, though undoubtedly some of them perished in the community's agricultural fields, where, nine months before, they harvested the first ripe corn for feasting and dancing during the Green Corn Ceremony.

The U.S. government soon stripped families of their ancestral lands and marched them to government-issued territories west of the Mississippi. Within two decades, the Creek and Cherokee communities of the Southeast were shadows of their former selves. The axis mundi turned upside down. As a result of the removal, traditions and knowledge that had persisted for millennia disappeared from the landscape.

The loss of foodways knowledge, especially the nixtamalization process, seemed inconsequential at the time. It was not. This failure to document and translate the single most important step in preparing corn for human consumption had far-reaching consequences. Native American oral traditions give us insight into the intimate relationship between people and corn. Corn was the food of the gods. Corn was the mother to all human creation.

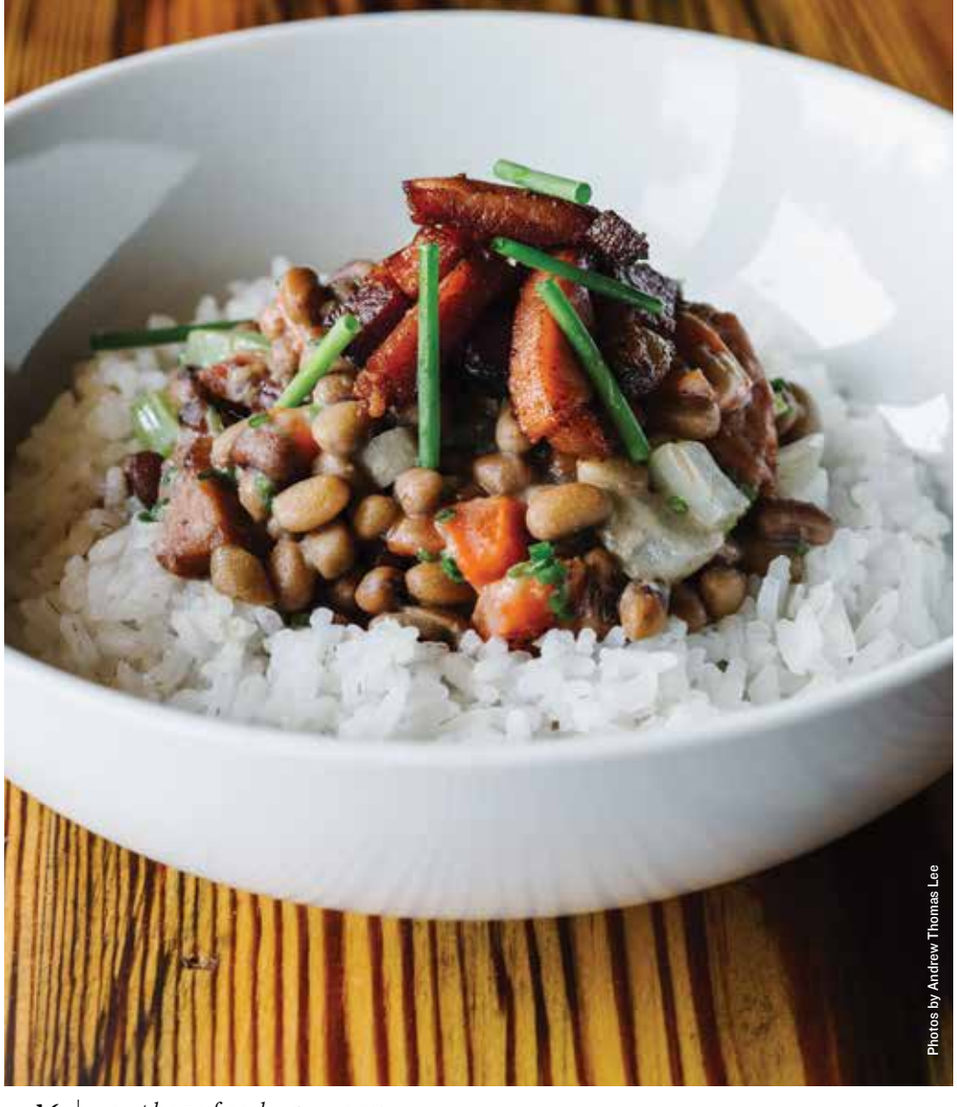
When Columbus packed up the first bushels of corn for his return trip to Spain, it did not hold this same spiritual primacy. To Columbus and his colleagues, corn was another potential commodity discovered in the New World, destined to become a cheap and widespread food source. Ultimately, ignorance of this crucial recipe catalyzed an international public health crisis. In the early twentieth century, it reached epidemic levels in the American South—the very land where Native Americans had once thrived on corn.

Tanya M. Peres is a zooarchaeologist and an associate professor of anthropology at Florida State University. She is at work on a book about the prehistoric roots of Southern foodways.

GOOD FORTUNE

WHEN I MET HOPPIN' JOHN

by Osayi Endolyn



Photos by Andrew Thomas Lee

"WHAT'S HOPPIN' JOHN?" I ASKED NO ONE IN PARTICULAR. It was 2013, and I was working as a host and server's assistant at Empire State South in Midtown Atlanta. Jason Zygmont had just brought out family meal during line-up, when the staff would discuss the night's menu and upcoming reservations and wolf down simple dinners like grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup, or penne pasta with veggies. At Empire State South, the cooks cure meat, filet whole fish, pickle vegetables, hand-roll pasta, ferment hot sauces, and tweezer-pluck bulbs from wild flowers. Family meal is necessarily no-frills. But that day, Jason treated us to a feast of herb-encrusted chicken, sorghum butter–topped cornbread, and Hoppin' John. As he disappeared into the kitchen to finish prepping for service, the hum in the room rose with gratitude.

When I asked my question, Darnell Perkins, a veteran server from Jackson, Mississippi, raised an eyebrow. "Black-eyed peas..." he trailed off, waiting for things to click. They didn't. He told me that Southern cooks made Hoppin' John with peas and rice, seasoned with onion, pork, and sometimes various peppers and spices. He said that it was good luck to cook on New Year's Day, and he set the origins of the dish in Lowcountry South Carolina.

I peered into the serving bowl. The contents looked comparable to a black-eyed pea dish my Nigerian dad made. It tasted familiar, too. My mom, a Los Angeles native, born to a Mississippi mother and a Louisiana father, had sometimes cooked black-eyed peas for New Year's Day. Still, I had never heard of this dish before. In a household where one parent was the West Coast product of black America's Great Migration and the other was born in Nigeria, I wondered how this staple dish, seemingly rooted in West African and African American traditions, could escape me.

This food, this history, had traveled far—why not far enough to reach my dining table?

THOUGH HE NEVER SAID IT outright, my father's kitchen philosophy, which I learned as a child, was, "A man needs his space." Neither I nor my two younger brothers were invited to the party. When Dad cooked, the kitchen was his alone. My father made what he liked to call "real food." Sometimes I'd feign thirst to gain kitchen access. I'd linger in front of the refrigerator water dispenser, watching Dad blend a mash of tomato paste with diced white onion, then scrape it into a giant, sizzling pot, smoking with hot palm oil.

"What are we having?" I asked once, taking a sip. "Stand back," he said over the crackle of searing liquid. He didn't meet my gaze. Dad would only tolerate my hovering for a few moments before banishing me from the kitchen—"anywhere but in here."

For the big dinnertime reveal, the five of us sat down at the birch oval dining table, my father's iron

curtain finally withdrawn. My feet barely grazed the floor. I would crane my neck as Dad carried piping-hot serving bowls toward us. More than two decades passed before I learned what went down after the palm oil entered the stew pot. I have a clear recollection of the result: a bowl of bright orange egusi soup, marked with ground melon seeds, wilted bitter leaves, crawfish, and dark chicken meat. Each place setting hosted a steaming ball of pounded yam. We would pull off a piece of the doughy material with our fingers, shaping it into a perfect disc, and then dip the eba, as my father called it, into the deep-flavored, pungent stew.

WITH HIM WENT THE EGUSI, THE GOAT MEAT TOMATO STEWS, SNACKS LIKE CHIN CHIN, ROASTED COCONUT, AND FRIED PUFF PUFF. BY THE TIME I WAS FIFTEEN, I HAD LOST MY TASTE FOR DAD AND HIS FOOD.

I don't know when I began to identify dishes like jollof rice, moin moin, and akara as Nigerian food. My father, born of the Edo tribe, never called them that. He didn't think of the dinners he prepared as ethnic or unique. This was just what we ate, part of a rotating cast of dishes that appeared in my central California household in the mid-1990s—tacos, spaghetti with store-bought sauce, tofu everything, and moo shu pork. Nigerian food stood out because that was all that my father cooked.

At the Empire State South family meal, I was reminded that Nigerian food hadn't been part of my repertoire for some time. I barely even knew where to source ingredients, much less how to cook the classic dishes. At the same time I noted that chasm, I began to realize that the food my father cooked in those giant metal pots, the recipes he cooked from memory, were deeply connected to the artfully plated, labor-intensive New Southern dishes I had begun serving, at $30-plus per entrée, to Empire State South patrons. The night I met Hoppin' John solidified those observations. I felt both loss and solace. Perhaps I had missed something integral. But the familiarity of Hoppin' John encouraged me. A part of this centuries-old food story belonged to me, even if I hadn't heard the whole narrative before. I wanted to fill in the missing parts.

FOLLOWING THE DIVORCE OF my parents, my brothers and I relocated with my mother. I had been fearful of my father for some time. In public, he was charming, effusive, and entertaining; everybody's favorite African. In private, he could be unpredictable, violent, and dismissively mean. I grew to genuinely dislike him. When my mother left my father, I saw her decision as a necessary step. He fumed, "A woman can't just leave her husband." A woman can and my mother did, moving us more than 300 miles away. But my dad's anger hovered over us like a shadow. After a while, memories of his meals failed to conjure warm feelings. With him went the egusi, the goat meat tomato stews, snacks like chin chin, roasted coconut, and fried puff puff. By the time I was fifteen, I had lost my taste for Dad and his food.

In 2006, I began to forge a new relationship with my father, almost eleven years after our stalemate. As a twentysomething crafting my own identity, I began to explore what Nigerian culture could mean to me. Years later, this shift deepened when I worked at Empire State South. During line-up meetings, we discussed Southern ingredients of West African descent, like benne seed and Carolina Gold rice. Chefs across the region were embracing and expanding on their Southern identities. Suddenly, I had a framework for asking questions about my own Southern heritage, my father's culture, and my relationship to the foods that branch from both sides of my family tree.

GROWING UP, WE DIDN'T EAT Hoppin' John. We savored ewa dodo, a chunky black-eyed pea stew made with fish, chopped tomatoes, and chili peppers, and served with a side of fried green plantain. Flavored with the umami of a Maggi bouillon cube (in West African cuisines, it's always about the Maggi—regardless of its high sodium content and hydrogenated oils), the thick stew cooked down to tender bits that Dad spooned over rice. For his rice and beans, he cooked both in the same pot. I didn't know then that slave traders had brought black-eyed peas (or cow peas, or field peas) as provisions for African slaves throughout the Americas. In countries like Cuba and Brazil, they still appear in a range of culturally distinct dishes. At first I didn't equate Hoppin'

Efo riro with fried fish and pounded yam.

Fried plantains with chicken gizzards.

John, with its pork hunks and fluffy rice, as a complex symbol of home and sustenance. It just reminded me of how Dad ate. Only later did I understand that black-eyed pea dishes were how *we* ate.

Talking with my father now is harder than it's ever been. Not because of personality conflicts or past frustrations—he has suffered multiple strokes. Over the years, partial facial paralysis and impaired cognitive function have made it nearly impossible to understand his formerly verbose and loquacious English. Perhaps I caught him on a bad day, but when I phoned to ask him what he knew about Hoppin' John, he became confused. The conversation, one-sided as it was, fizzled.

I suspect that, like several Nigerian cooks and restaurant diners I've met, he would not be shocked that so much Southern cuisine developed from the practices of enslaved West Africans. Sure, rice, okra, black-eyed peas, and yams may be sacred to certain parts of our collective American culinary identity. No matter. Please pass the fufu. My father did not require this knowledge to define his identity. As complex as Nigerian history is, he knew his place in the story, which didn't require the narrative of forced migration and the foods that came with it. I recognized that while Dad was satisfied with his self-portrait, I could only sketch part of mine.

When I tasted my first Hoppin' John at family meal, the sense of familiarity intensified. This was nothing like the robust flavor of my father's ewa dodo. The taste was much smoother and lighter. Yet when my friends and coworkers dunked pieces of cornbread into the dish, I recognized that this was the way we dipped pieces of plantain into my father's ewa dodo. The alarm I felt at my ignorance of black American identity grew into the pride of a second-generation immigrant. I knew this dance. We'd been here before. Hoppin' John and I were late to meet each other, but we'd been family since way back when.

Osayi Endolyn's writing has appeared in Atlanta Magazine, Eater, *and* New York Magazine's The Cut. *She is an alumna of the SFA's Rivendell Writers Colony Workshop and is working on a book about the West African origins of American cuisine.*

PIMENTO CHEESE IN A PARKA

WHAT SOUTHERN MEANS TO CHICAGO

by John Kessler

For my first winter in Chicago, I bought a goose-down parka with a hood trimmed in coyote fur. Whenever I came home from walking the dog in the snow at night, the hall mirror reflected me as a dark lump topped by a pair of freezing, bulging eyeballs set in a ring of fur. I looked like Kenny from *South Park*, if not Death himself in a cowl.

A Chicago winter can feel like end-times to a Southern transplant. I arrived to join my wife, who had begun a job a year ago at the University of Chicago. Before that, I had worked for nearly two decades as a columnist for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. In Atlanta, I ate my way Southern. During that time, I documented a sea change in the city's food culture, as the regional standard bearers turned from cafeterias and all-you-can-eat buffets to restaurants directed by studious chefs. When I speak of chefs who supported area farmers and researched foodways, it now sounds cliché, but goddamn if Scott Peacock's fried chicken and vegetable plate at Watershed circa 2005 didn't change my world. As the city came of age, so did I.

I expected to miss Southern food in my new hometown. I did not expect to spy a funhouse version of it around every corner. Chicago is in the throes of an energetic (and, honestly, slightly bananas) infatuation with the South. The word "Southern" has become a capacious vessel into which hungry people slop buckets of desire and nostalgia. It is, yes, fried things. And bourbon cocktails and hockey-puck biscuits (go Blackhawks!). It is also more. Random burgers here earn the sobriquet Southern. Chicken

I EXPECTED TO MISS SOUTHERN FOOD IN MY NEW HOMETOWN. I DID NOT EXPECT TO SPY A FUNHOUSE VERSION OF IT AROUND EVERY CORNER.

tenders are Southern. Pimento cheese Southernizes furls of cavatappi pasta.

"People here love that whole hillbilly chickenshit attitude," says Art Smith, the former personal chef to Oprah Winfrey whose Chicago restaurant, Table Fifty-Two, helped pave the way for this current cohort of Bubba Come Latelys. He's right. I have seen completely nonsensical "North Carolina pulled pork po-boys" and "Nashville hot wings" at restaurants. One menu boasted "Georgia lake prawns." Really? I'm going to have to look for those trawlers on Lake Lanier next time I go back.

My family and I settled in the Bucktown neighborhood, on the ground floor of the former Wojciechowski Funeral Home, which served as a major triage center during the 1918 flu pandemic. We liked the old bones and history. The day we toured the building and put in an offer, we ate brunch, on our realtor's suggestion, at a nearby restaurant called The Southern.

A dark retreat for the hungover, The Southern stocked bourbon behind the bar and featured a sign lettered in the same font as the *Gone with the Wind* movie credits. The menu was pure redonkulosity—an eggs Benedict variation made with biscuits and fried boneless chicken, a "Southern Reuben" of braised brisket and pimento remoulade. I dug into a pile of Breakfast Macaroni, tossed with curds of scrambled eggs and slivers of bacon. It didn't taste too bad for a dish that, posted to Instagram, would have recalled a medical textbook image. Despite its name, The Southern, with its day drinkers, hefty sandwiches, trendy avocado toast, and indifference to seasonal vegetables, seemed so very Chicago to me. Restaurants like these are Southern in the way that *The Mikado* serves as a meditation on Japanese culture.

A spot in nearby Lakeview, Wishbone, employs a flying-chicken decorative theme (think scores of soaring chickens painted on rafters and soffits overhead, like a comic vision of Hitchcock's *The Birds*) and serves what it calls "Southern cooking for thinking people." The implication is not that inchoate emotions typically rule diners from the former Confederacy. Instead, the motto is meant to convey that the kitchen prepares the food with supposedly healthy ingredients. The Wishbone menu throws around descriptors like "Asheville" to indicate blue cheese and honey-mustard dressing in a salad. And it takes liberties with established dishes. Hoppin' John translates as a bottomless bowl of black beans and brown rice under a thick cap of melted cheddar cheese. Bless their hearts.

At Buck's in Wicker Park, the tagline is "Southern fried funk" and the website promises "a taste of 'Down South, Up North.'" It is a place of lounge seating, grandma china, buckets of fried

Natalie Nelson

chicken, Cheerwine floats, ironic hospitality-pineapple wallpaper, and hot biscuits served with forlorn little plastic cups of pimento cheese. Look at the booze menu, though, and you couldn't be anywhere but Chicago. The signature "Bucknasty" brings a Schlitz tallboy and a shot of Malört, the locally beloved bitter liqueur that tastes like Fernet-Branca's evil twin. This is food and drink designed to help you endure the cold.

A restaurant called Dixie will soon open five blocks from my home. The name gives me pause, as does chef-owner Charlie McKenna's talk of taking design inspiration from "the antebellum South." McKenna, a South Carolinian who worked in high-end restaurants before opening a well-liked local barbecue spot, Lillie's Q, has strong ideas about the kind of South that Chicago wants. That vision includes cocktails and non-traditional small plates, such as Nashville hot sweetbreads with white bread sauce. (Itself a riff on hot chicken and the white bread that traditionally accompanies it, a version of the dish first appeared at The Catbird Seat in Nashville.)

I walked to Dixie in an early-April snowstorm that swirled to a near whiteout before blowing off. McKenna met me at the site on a hopping restaurant block. Tucked alongside a French bistro and a Japanese izakaya, built as a typical A-frame brick house, the Dixie space had once been the Michelin-starred restaurant Takashi. McKenna gutted the building and poured a raised concrete front porch for rocking chairs to face the busy street. Inspired by the piazzas of Charleston architecture, he tucked the entrance at the side of the building, halfway down a narrow alley. ("We're thinking of putting up a sign that reads, 'In the South we enter on the side,'" said Nick Bowers, head of the architecture and design firm overseeing the buildout.)

THE WORD "SOUTHERN" HAS BECOME A CAPACIOUS VESSEL INTO WHICH HUNGRY PEOPLE SLOP BUCKETS OF DESIRE AND NOSTALGIA.

I tried to ask McKenna about the words "Dixie" and "antebellum." To my ears, both are charged with layers of complicated meanings. I had to push, perhaps a little too stridently, the question of slavery. I could tell this wasn't where McKenna expected the conversation to go.

"For me, the name Dixie kind of represents the South as a whole," he said, pausing to find the right tone. "You know, it's where I came from. I'm going to be taking a lot of the food and ingredients the slaves brought over and celebrating it in a better light. It's just a word. It's the people who make the South great."

I pursued the question later with Bowers, who had been researching antebellum color schemes ("greens, blues, reds: bold colors") and design accents ("brushed brass and gold"). Historical photos, purchased from a restaurant-prop supplier, would blanket the side walls. I asked if they planned to vet the pictures to find out if they depicted slave owners. I asked if any of the pictures would include black faces. Bowers grew uncomfortable, saying, "Obviously slavery is not a focus to the restaurant. If we know it's somebody who was negatively impacting the South, we wouldn't use that image."

I wonder if Dixie will be a place where no guest will know the tune to whistle it. I am looking forward to those sweetbreads, and when McKenna talks about serving country ham and cheese straws at the bar, the very words thrill me to my toes. But with its rocking chairs and brushed brass, Dixie promises to thematize the pre–Civil War South for a curious dining public, much as the lace curtains, art nouveau lettering and pressed tin ceiling of its neighbor evokes the idealized Paris of a hundred years ago. Southern food and Southern history belong to all of us, and after living in Atlanta, I can't separate them.

Paul Fehribach, the Indiana native who runs the city's best and most thoughtful Southern restaurant, Big Jones, thinks Southern cooking resonates because it is, at heart, American country cooking. He says that's why you see the word "Southern" on Chicago restaurants as often as (if not more than) you see "Midwestern." "Southern" translates, in the minds of diners, as a kind of idealized home cooking.

Fehribach, who builds historical research into his recipes, serves collard-green sandwiches on cornbread, house-cured tasso ham, Sally Lunn bread, Memphis-style barbecue, and Edna Lewis–inspired fried chicken that earns national praise. His menu surveys the subregions of the South in their fractured glory, but it all feels of a piece.

ALL OF THESE RESTAURANTS are on the predominately white North Side of the city. Most black Chicagoans who can trace their roots to the South and to the Great Migration make their homes on the South Side. My own family began its Chicago adventure last summer in the South Side neighborhood of Hyde Park, a diverse community where we lived for a couple of months in University of Chicago housing. Our flat was in a dark, stately Renaissance-revival apartment complex that made me think of *Rosemary's Baby*. It has, through the years, apparently

housed more Nobel laureates than any building in the country.

There were no "Southern" restaurants nearby, but the local market stocked produce I recognized from Georgia, including okra and scuppernongs. Once when I returned home laden with groceries and couldn't open the massive wrought-iron grille door, Belinda Clark, the African American woman working the front desk that day, leapt up to help me. "Now what are you going to do with those greens?" she laughed, looking into my shopping bag. I explained that I cooked a good, if non-traditional, pot of collards. To prove my bona fides, I let it slip that I had just moved from Georgia. Clark's face lit up. Her grandparents emigrated from Alabama and Mississippi. The South fueled her imagination. She and her husband hoped to take a long driving vacation once they could get the time.

Clark grew tomatoes, collard greens, beans, peas, and okra in her home garden. Some years she wouldn't plant until May for fear of a frost. Her husband hunted to stock the freezer. They loved fishing together. Her cooking was not that different from her grandmother's. For the next couple of months, we talked about food every time our paths crossed. She helped me deal with the dull ache of homesickness and the equally insistent ache for okra.

Home. That's surely what I miss when I miss Southern food. I get it. When I mutter that the grits at some trendy brunch place suck, I'm also saying that it shouldn't be 42 degrees outside in May, that I miss my backyard garden and my friends, and that I fret I will never experience in Chicago that sense of food and place, of season and cook, that was the soul of every meal at Cakes & Ale in Decatur.

Then again, sometimes I wonder if that's what everyone here looks for in Southern food, even if they've never been to the South. Maybe it's part of our shared cultural memory, our American identity. Or perhaps Southern is the new Thai—a crowd-pleaser with a whiff of the exotic.

I'm cooking more Southern food now. I keep Anson Mills grits in the freezer, and I cook a pot of greens whenever I find any that look half good. And now that I live on the North Side, I can walk a few blocks for a pimento cheese and fried green tomato biscuit sandwich. It's an unholy trinity, let me tell you. I sometimes want to stand on my bar stool and yell to all Chicago, "People! Cold pimento cheese and hot biscuits: not a thing!" Then again, on a chilly May night, it doesn't taste too bad.

John Kessler was the longtime restaurant critic for the Atlanta Journal-Constitution. *He is currently working on a book with The Giving Kitchen, an Atlanta nonprofit.*

POND Fresh

ED SCOTT AND HIS CATFISH

by Julian Rankin

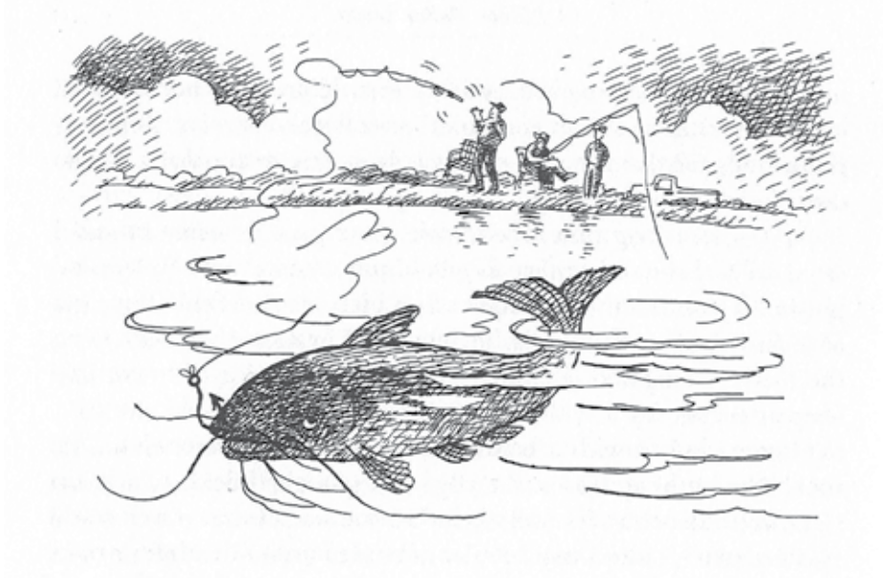
Lynn Marshall-Linnemeier

THE NEIGHBOR JERKED THE WHEEL AND PULLED TO THE SIDE OF THE DIRT ROAD TO WATCH.

He left his door open and scrambled onto the hood of his car to get a better look at the farmer, Ed Scott Jr., who was standing about a hundred yards off on a bluff of freshly exposed clay in what had recently been a soybean field. Scott was looking down at six feet of absent earth that stretched for acres. From a distance, it appeared to the neighbor as if Scott was staring into a crater left by a meteor. Even atop the hood of the car, the neighbor couldn't see what was down there. He saw Scott wave his hands and whistle. He heard an engine roar and saw smoke billow. From the neighbor's vantage point, it looked like the smoke came spewing directly from the earth. This optical illusion only heightened the magic. *Scott is speaking to the ground,* the neighbor chuckled to himself. *And it's doing as he says.*

Ed Scott didn't benefit from a safety net. If his crops failed, he failed. Born in 1922, he lived through the transition from farming by mule and man to the modern agricultural age of combines, laser-precise machinery, and integrated irrigation. Even with new technologies and massive United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) subsidies, well-equipped farmers like Scott earned frighteningly narrow profit margins. Most scraped by on grit and guts and trial-and-error lessons.

With these realities in mind, Ed Scott formed a cooperative in 1971 in the area of Leflore County, Mississippi, known as Brooks Farm. Black farmers shared equipment and pooled both their money and their labor. More than a dozen farmers joined the co-op, which was incorporated and organized as the Leflore County Area Cooperative (and later reorganized as the Leflore-Bolivar Land Corporation). The community coalesced around the co-op and around Scott's assets and success. At the time, Scott was the only farmer with access to



Ellen Joy Sasaki

real capital. The hope was that smaller farmers could, through the co-op, acquire loans and government support.

At the high water mark, Scott farmed close to 4,000 acres in two Delta counties, Leflore and Bolivar. Much of the land he owned. The rest he leased. He was a respected business leader and minority employer who supported a dozen families with jobs, including just about anyone from his extended familial web who wanted to work. Ed Scott was by far the most ambitious of his peers. Daniel Scott, Ed's grandson, remembers his grandfather flying down the road on payday with a "big ol' knot of money in his front pocket" to pay his workers.

It would have been tempting to note Ed Scott's success in the late 1970s and early 1980s and say that the he had it made. He did not. Larger forces dwarfed Scott's fiefdom. Scott's relationship with the lords of agriculture was feudal, demanding obligation and subservience. Despite these constraints, Scott forged his own path of business success. His vision and execution exposed the fallacy of ordained white supremacy that had long dominated Southern agriculture.

Scott faced down the resentment and ill-will of peers and neighbors. He weathered institutional discrimination from the highest levels. In the absence of the panther, which had once ruled Delta swampland, a new threat emerged in the form of bank presidents and plantation owners and Farmers Home Administration (FmHA) agency supervisors who manipulated cash flow. It's difficult to lay blame for this institutional misconduct at the feet of specific individuals. The people who tried to hold Scott back were pawns of the status quo. As Scott's daughter Willena White puts it, "If it hadn't been one man, it would have been another."

FmHA, founded in 1946, extended credit to the people who were hardest off. It replaced an agency called the Farm Security Administration, which had done much the same during the Great Depression. In 1995, bureaucrats renamed FmHA the Farm Services Agency. Throughout these reorganizations and renamings, the mission has been the same: to provide financial leverage and aid to farmers in rural communities. As traditional agriculture grew more unpredictable and difficult to sustain in the latter half of the twentieth century, government programs subsidized heartland agriculture. Dollars funded disaster relief in times of flood or drought and bolstered operating reserves. The government provided life support for domestic agriculture, an important emblem of national vitality and self-determination, much as it continues to do for Amtrak, whose trains criss-cross this country day and night, passengers or no passengers. Farming is too central of an American ethic and ideal, too vital to the collective psyche to let falter.

Owing money to the government was, for farmers, as expected as wearing boots in the field. But the Scotts were unique for farmers of their size. They had not relied on government loans. Until 1978, the Scotts had secured cash directly from community banks, insurance companies, or economic development organizations like Mississippi Action for Community Education (MACE). Scott's father, Edward Sr., had spent the years following the Depression making friends with bankers and bureaucrats. Scott Jr. valued the businesses relationships he developed at places like Bank of Ruleville. He never asked the federal government for money. Nobody had ever encouraged him to do so. He didn't even think it was a viable option for the black farmer. In some ways, he was right.

Just as FmHA could extend you credit, they could also restructure your loan in times of hardship, or even write it off completely. The agency treated loans like Monopoly money. They approved, secured, and then subordinated most of the loans to local banks. The banks got their interest on the loan and the surety that came with a government cosign.

Huge sums from FmHA helped sow thousands of acres of farmland and supported countless workers. But in Southern communities with a legacy of segregation and prejudice, the money was not distributed equitably.

THE SCOTTS FIRST ASKED

the government for money in January 1978. Vance Nimrod, a white man who worked with Delta Foundation, helped walk them through the process. Delta Foundation aimed to revitalize rural economies and build human capital in disenfranchised minority communities. On a Thursday morning, Ed Scott met Nimrod by his truck in the parking lot. They walked toward the FmHA office building in Greenwood. It was nondescript, four brick walls and a roof and little else. It could have housed a small-town dentist's office.

A man greeted Scott and Nimrod inside the door, led them to a table, and left. Another man arrived and sat down across the table. This was Delbert Edwards, FmHA agency supervisor for Leflore County. Scott and Nimrod took turns talking, going over the numbers in the loan application. Scott had figured all of the expenses he'd need for a profitable year of rice and soybeans. Edwards made notes. When he spoke, he talked to Nimrod. In the end, the three men stood up and shook hands. Scott walked out of the office with every penny he'd asked for. *That man didn't even make us sign anything,* Scott thought. *The other farmers were right. It* is *easier to get your money from the government.*

Scott reaped a good harvest in 1978

and returned to FmHA the next year. This time, he arrived to the office without Nimrod. Instead, his son Isaac Scott came along. Father and son sat down with Edwards at the very same table. Edwards pulled the file from the previous year. He opened it up and laid it before the men. But Edwards didn't say anything right away. He sat still, waiting. A few long seconds passed as the men looked at each other. As Scott remembered it, Edwards finally asked them, "Where's that other man?"

"What other man are you talking about?" said Scott.

"I'm talking about that white man. Where's he?"

"He wasn't part of us," said Scott. "He was just with us to help us get our money."

Edwards looked surprised. His pen slipped from his hand and fell to the floor. "He wasn't with you," Scott heard Edwards say softly. "Okay."

Edwards picked his pen up from the floor. With it, he began marking through the figures on Scott's loan application.

During the middle of the meeting, the FmHA office broke for lunch. Out in the parking lot, the Scotts got ready to drive away. As Scott climbed into the family Chevrolet—always a Chevy—Edwards prodded him. Scott recalled him saying, "Ed, that a new truck?"

"Yeah," said Scott, leaning his head out of the window.

"Who told you to buy a new truck? Nobody told you to buy a new truck."

"You don't have to tell me to buy a new truck," Scott said, pulling away. "I know how to spend my money."

FmHA officers were not micromanagers by rule. In general, a farmer had the leeway to purchase equipment or feed or irrigation pipes or batteries or work gloves or groceries as he saw fit. If the farmer was white, it seemed, his financial judgment could be trusted. "Does your wife need a new car this year?" Isaac Scott remembers overhearing an FmHA loan officer ask a farmer. "Let's put a little money in for that."

The truck was akin to the suits that Ed Scott Sr. had worn in the fields a generation before: a signifier of business acumen and respectability that defied hierarchies of master and worker. Scott could have stuck with a late model Chevy. But he didn't succumb to the expectations of others. Instead, he bought new Chevrolets. He rode high on top-of-the-line tractors. He spoke truth to power.

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Lynn Marshall-Linnemeier

THE SCOTT FAMILY ROSE to prominence during a time of change, when demand and price fluctuations for staple row crops like cotton, rice, and soybeans destabilized agriculture. During the mid-twentieth century, farmers profited from a tested range of crops and consistent government-backed subsidies. The primary source of instability was the weather. As U.S. farmers entered world markets, the situation changed.

As distribution of Southern crops globalized and grew more volatile, farmer demographics shifted. Between 1969 and 1980, the number of individual farms decreased from nearly 1.74 million to about one million. At the same time, the size of the average farm increased. Small, independent farmers, white and black, whose presence atop their tractors on the Delta roadside had been ubiquitous, fell away. In their place came conglomerated, corporate agribusiness. This movement left one group buried in the loam: black farmers. Their ranks had already been declining. Modern restructuring exacerbated the slide. In 1950, more than half a million black farmers worked land in the South. By 1978, that number had dwindled to about fifty thousand.

During that same thirty-year period, emerging markets whipsawed from boom to bust. Profits for old standards like wheat and rice and soybeans oscillated wildly. Crop variability, a term that describes this fluctuation, doubled for wheat in the years from 1964 to 1980. Shifts were even more dramatic for soybeans. Agricultural economists predicted more of the same in the years to come. Because world markets were beyond control of domestic growers, small farmers suffered the most.

The Russian embargo of 1980 exacerbated the uncertainty. In response to the communist superpower's intervention in Afghanistan, President Jimmy Carter cut off all sales of U.S. grain to the USSR, the largest importer of U.S. corn and wheat. The short-lived embargo did little to cripple the USSR, but the American farmer, already walloped by inflation, took the hit as Soviet export markets dried up.

How could leaders in Southern agriculture insulate themselves from these variables to create more sustainable and predictable outcomes? For the answer, farmers in the Mississippi Delta looked to a classic Southern folk ingredient with big business potential: catfish.

ALONG WITH OTHER working-class foods like chitlins and cracklins, catfish had previously been relegated to the muddy bottom of the American food chain. Long before the fish was a commodity, Southerners hooked cats on cane poles or bought them from enterprising fisherman. Commercial catfish farming was born in Arkansas. Farmers raised fish in the Delta region of that state by the late 1950s. Mississippi followed with its first documented commercial catfish pond in 1965. By the 1970s, Mississippi surpassed all other states in catfish farming and production. In the 1980s, the industry doubled in size. Mississippi took the leadership role in American catfish and would be responsible in the years to come for roughly eighty percent of the country's catfish production. The alluvial landscape of the Delta proved ideal for catfish. The deep soil deposits of the Delta drain poorly. That soil supported and retained giant ponds. New technologies and industry organization spurred growth. In the early years of commercial catfish farming, farmers marketed their own products, mostly locally. With the formation of catfish trade groups in the state and the emergence of large processing cooperatives like Delta Pride of Indianola, farmers took

Ellen Joy Sasaki

BY THE 1970S, MISSISSIPPI SURPASSED ALL OTHER STATES IN CATFISH FARMING AND PRODUCTION. THE ALLUVIAL LANDSCAPE OF THE DELTA PROVED IDEAL FOR CATFISH.

advantage of new research, resources, and marketing plans. The Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce helped form the most influential of these trade groups. The Catfish Farmers of America and the Catfish Farmers of Mississippi promised cohesion and organization to the industry. Under their leadership, catfish became a bankable commodity.

These trade groups, along with other agricultural agencies and researchers, introduced new methods for raising, feeding, and processing the fish. Consistency was the ultimate goal. With improvements and resources, farmers could provide a product that appealed to middle-class consumers. Taste testers graded the fish prior to processing to control against unpleasant flavors.

In the catfish industry, these various substandard tastes are known as "off-flavor," a more innocuous term than the "muddy" designation. Not inherent to the fish itself, off-flavor catfish are the result of environmental factors, including diet, pond contamination, weather, and—most commonly—absorption of bacteria through the skin and gills. For Southern catfish farmers, a bacteria produced by pond algae was the primary offender. The fish absorbed these bacteria into their fatty flesh, resulting in a slightly medicinal taste. Ever-conscious of their brand, the modern catfish industry put in safeguards to silo these off-flavor fish from the market until the pond environment improved.

Long-held consumer perceptions proved more difficult to change. With a consistent product in place, industry groups launched informational campaigns and touted the delicacy to all who would listen. NBC *Today Show* weatherman Willard Scott sampled the fish on air in 1985, declaring, "If I go down for anything in history, I would like to be known as the person who convinced the American people that catfish is one of the finest eating fishes in the world."

Black farmers like Ed Scott were largely forgotten in this agricultural recalibration, left to figure out their own alternatives to traditional row crops. Delbert Edwards never expected Scott to build his own catfish ponds. He assumed Scott's row cropping operation would falter in the wake of declining markets. While the white farmers talked about how to tap into available government resources, Scott didn't benefit from information about best practices and marketing strategies. But he saw the future clearly, and he heard the message this way: Find resources where you can, become a catfish farmer, dig your own ponds, harvest your own fish, and make your own markets—or quit farming.

"I got the sense that FmHA was preaching catfish to a group of white farmers and Ed Scott was on the outside

of the room listening in," says attorney Phil Fraas, who would become one of Scott's staunchest allies in the eventual *Pigford v. Glickman* class-action discrimination case against USDA, starting in 1997. "He wasn't included on the conversation, but he listened well and did it on his own. That, I think, is what really ruffled Delbert Edwards's feathers. The idea that those conversations weren't meant for you, that strategy is not meant for you because you're the black farmer. You're supposed to be the smaller operation and the basic one-tractor-do-your-soybeans-and-that's-it setup."

"I WATCHED MR. ED DIG those ponds," said one of Scott's neighbors. "I just woke up one day and they were out there digging catfish ponds. It was absolutely fascinating. And still to this day, it was unbeknownst to me how they did it. All that land, it used to be just rice. And it turned into a fish pond."

Delbert Edwards showed up when Scott and his sons had almost finished digging the last of eight twenty-acre ponds. He wasn't there on a planned visit. He didn't drive over to lend engineering advice or to congratulate Scott on the progress. Edwards had gotten wind that a black farmer was digging holes in the ground and calling them fish ponds, and he wanted to see it for himself. He shut his truck door and looked out over the 160 acres of transformed rice fields. Edwards began walking toward the ponds. Scott met him halfway. Now that he had the ponds, maybe he and Edwards could get along after all, he thought. Now that he could make FmHA some money. The two men came face to face. Scott greeted Edwards—who, as Scott recalled, only had one thing to tell him. "Don't think I'm giving you any damn money for that dirt you're moving."

Scott finished his ponds in 1981. He applied for another loan from the local FmHA office for 1982. He needed fish, and he needed feed. Edwards was less than enthusiastic. When he and Scott met to run the numbers for a proposed operating loan, Edwards said little. He made notes while Scott spoke. At one point, Scott recalled, Edwards scribbled the figure "50 cents," presumably indicative of his evaluation of the loan request. Scott didn't get his money that day.

Scott knew that if he couldn't obtain funding, the ponds would remain empty basins. With no satisfactory response from the local office, he made a trip to the state FmHA office in Jackson. Papers in hand, he pleaded for help to get his money moving. The state arm of FmHA reviewed Scott's situation and instructed Delbert Edwards to fund the farm. Scott did receive an infusion of cash. But the amount was insufficient to stock the twenty-acre ponds he dug. He received a third of the approximately $450,000 required to capitalize an eight-pond operation. Of the ponds he dug, no more than four were ever full.

THE SCOTTS STOOD ON the edge of the pond in the late summer of 1981. Sealed plastic bags full of fingerling channel catfish floated on the surface of the water. Inside the bags, the little fish wriggled in their confined puddles, becoming acclimated. Scott and his sons waited and watched. In ten minutes, the temperature difference between the water in the bags and the ponds stabilized. Bending down, Scott broke the seal on one of the bags and let the waters mix. The baby catfish, incubated in a climate-controlled hatchery, entered the frontier of the murky pond water. They swam cautiously from their enclosure into the wider pond, investigating their new surroundings.

Ellen Joy Sasaki

Here's how Ed Scott farmed catfish in the early 1980s: Scout the land. Dig the ponds and drill the wells. Stock the waters with young fingerling catfish, bought from a hatchery in the nearby town of Drew. Buy as much feed as possible and launch the soybean-rice-wheat-protein pellets across the pond. Grow the fish to maturity. Harvest the fish. Get them processed, hopefully at the big new processing plant a few counties south. Sell them far and wide.

He'd done an impressive job of stocking his ponds with the money from FmHA. Scott spent the rest of it on feed, and he needed more. When he went back for more money, Edwards refused. Scott said that Edwards told him to "let the fish die."

Catfish begin to reach maturity at around eighteen months. As he managed his first crop of fish, Scott steadily worked to find a processor. The Delta catfish processing apparatus had developed parallel to the growing industry. Delta Pride was the largest and most technologically advanced plant in the area. The Indianola-based company helped realize the modern industry in 1981. Structured as a farmer-owned cooperative, the company built relationships with farmer-stockholders who provided a steady supply of catfish, which Delta Pride processed, marketed, and distributed across the region.

To gain entrée, Scott gave the man his family called "Lawyer Townsend" instructions to purchase Delta Pride stock on his behalf. But when P.J. Townsend attempted to make the transaction for Ed Scott, Delta Pride wouldn't sell it to him. Townsend relayed the conversation to Scott. Here's what Scott heard: Lawyer Townsend wasn't able to buy stock "according to the color of your skin."

Few, if any, farmers vertically integrated their operations. For a catfish farm

to succeed, a typical farmer relied on a number of different companies, services, and funders. If Scott couldn't get enough funding from the government, he couldn't buy any more fingerlings or feed. Without a plant to process his fish, he'd be shut out of the marketplace. Scott had planned for this likelihood. He resolved to skin his own fish if it came down to it. Ed Scott didn't get into catfish to wage political war; he wanted to earn a living. When he saw a roadblock, instead of looking for a shortcut, Scott built a new highway. And he barreled down the double-yellow line in a black Chevy truck at breakneck speed.

Though he never could buy stock in Delta Pride, the company became a resource for Scott. Proud of its state-of-the-art production line, Delta Pride regularly welcomed visitors and potential investors. Scott asked Lawyer Townsend to set up a visit. Townsend's secretary made arrangements, telling a Delta Pride secretary that she was sending over "two prominent businessmen who would like a guided tour."

On a clear Delta weekday, Scott and his son Isaac drove the hour over to Indianola. They were quiet and reflective. "Don't tell them we're here to see what they're doing," Isaac said as they drew close. The complex was imposing and stark against the distant treeline and brushy growth of the surrounding farmland. It was also physically large in a part of the state where many homes are small, and where big buildings mean big power.

"Don't tell them you're going to try to process your own fish," Isaac warned his father. "Because they aren't going to tell you a thing after that."

Scott held his ground "If he asks, I'm going to say exactly what I'm down here for: to see what they're doing that I can't do myself."

When they arrived, Scott and Isaac sat down in the waiting room. A lady told them to make themselves comfortable and wait. They waited for the better

Lynn Marshall-Linnemeier

WHEN HE SAW A ROADBLOCK, INSTEAD OF LOOKING FOR A SHORTCUT, SCOTT BUILT A NEW HIGHWAY. AND HE BARRELED DOWN THE DOUBLE-YELLOW LINE IN A BLACK CHEVY TRUCK AT BREAKNECK SPEED.

part of forty-five minutes. Both men, participants in the civil rights struggles of the 1960s, were well-versed in the proactive tactic of the sit-in. Finally, a man named Larry came out from the back to say that he would be with them in a few more minutes.

Seeing the inner workings of Delta Pride, glimpsing the perpetual motion of man and machine, was like lifting the veil on Wonka's factory: the hum of refrigerators, the suck of eviscerators, the RPM drone of headsaws, the *zoop zoop zoop* of a hundred blades cutting, cutting, cutting. Plant workers sorted the fish by size and weight, some destined to be packaged filets, others steaks, some sealed and frozen whole. As the fish came down the line, workers deftly severed the body from the head. The next crew snatched the bodies, ripped open the stomachs, and sucked out the entrails. Moving up the line, the skinners took charge. The fish would then be boxed and labeled and stacked on palettes by a different set of gloved and calloused hands in a separate department of the factory. This fast-twitch ballet happened almost wordlessly at Delta Pride. It was cold. Precise. Black men and women, who accounted for almost all of the manual labor positions, repeated their calibrated tasks in tandem with the machines.

On the way through the plant, Larry made conversation. He told Scott and Isaac what each person was doing and why. Father and son listened. After a while, Larry asked, "So do y'all have a catfish farm?"

"Yeah," said Scott.

"You got any stock in the plant?"

"Nope," said Scott.

Larry stopped walking. They were near the loading dock now, in front of the thick plastic bannered curtain that separated the skinning side from the packing side. "You got anything lined up with live haulers, then?"

"Nope."

"Well then, what the hell you going to do with your fish, eat 'em?!"

"Something like that," said Scott.

SCOTT FINANCED THE processing plant out of his own pocket, bit by bit. Frank Brown, a self-taught carpenter from nearby Drew, laid concrete on one side of the plant. Scott paid him half. Brown laid down concrete on the other side. Scott paid him the other half. Every little while, he'd call Brown and ask for something new to be constructed. Bit by bit, the plant emerged.

THE WOMEN AT THE PLANT CALLED THEMSELVES "THE DEPENDABLES." THEY LIVED NEARBY AND WORKED ANY AND ALL SHIFTS, IN SNOW AND STORM, AMID MUD AND GUTS.

What had been a dirt-floor tractor shed on wooden posts became an insulated, self-contained catfish processing operation, plopped in the middle of nowhere.

As construction continued at Scott's Fresh Catfish, later renamed Pond Fresh Catfish, Scott reached out to the Mississippi State University Extension Service's Food and Fiber Center and told a professor there that he was installing a one-line catfish plant. Scott asked him if they had any literature on it. The man said no, but that he'd get something from Auburn University. "Something" turned out to be a four-page pamphlet about what building materials to use inside the plant. No wood, no fiberglass, all stainless steel. That was all Scott needed to know.

"I called that doctor back and told him I received the information," says Scott. "'And when I get done,' I said to him, 'I want you to come inspect it. When I open the doors, I'm going to be able to sell to anybody.' And sure enough, I did."

Ed Scott became an unwelcome catfish dorsal jabbed in the hand of FmHA, who now wanted him out. With the knowledge he gleaned from that brief glimpse at the lines of Delta Pride, Scott propelled himself forward.

Ed Scott was self-educated. He studied the processes of others. Folk methods and efficiencies worked their way into his philosophies. Before the plant was complete and automated, he had taught workers to deep-skin the catfish, then a little-used technique. Daniel Scott reckons that his grandfather picked up the practice from watching a worker meticulously skin discarded runt fish to take home, a skill that worker might have gotten from his aunt who got it from her mother, and so on.

"Scraping the black stuff off the bellies" is how Ed Scott described the skinning process to a layperson. Workers removed the grime and film from the fish with a bristled brush. The industry now calls a similar cut "delacata." It's considered the best cut of the fish, a sort of catfish tenderloin.

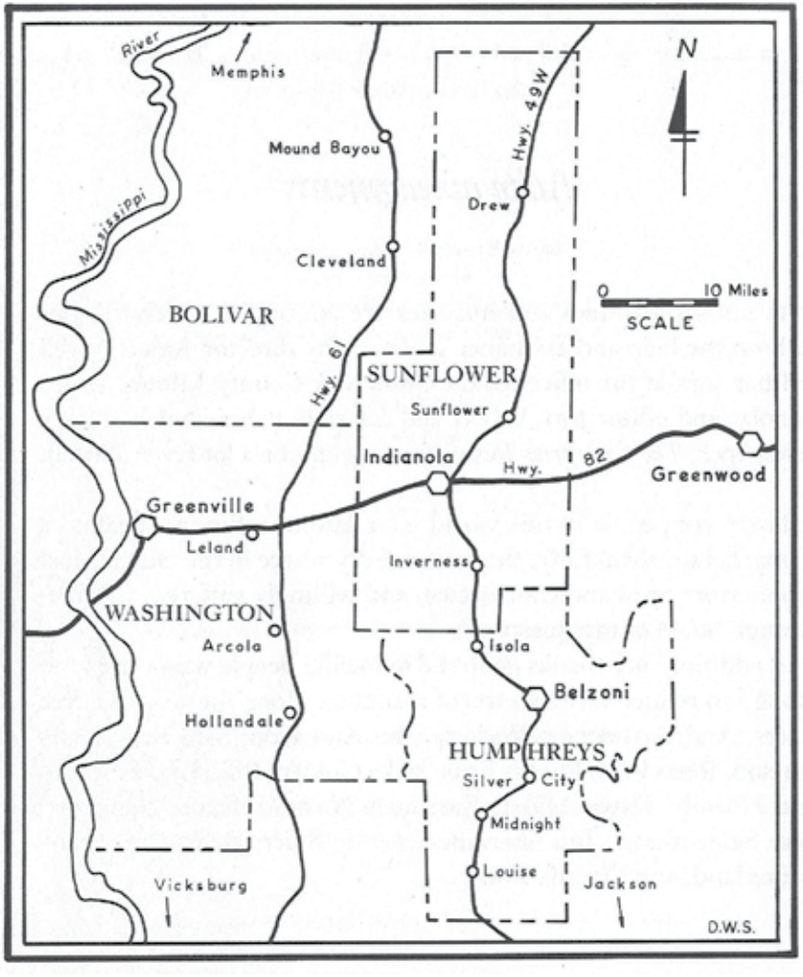
SCOTT'S FRESH CATFISH opened on a cold, clear February day in 1983. The air pulsed with excitement. Family, friends, and newly hired plant workers milled in the gravel drive between the plant and the Scotts' home. The one-line plant was smaller than any in the Delta as far as Scott knew, but it was still substantial, larger than the farm house where he lived. The builder had expanded the footprint of the former tractor shed, constructing a cinder block–walled main killing floor that connected with offices and loading docks. Wood-plank siding, laid vertically and painted a striking red, covered the exterior of the administrative wing. The color popped against the adjacent cinder-block wall, painted white. The finishing touch, hung up just hours before, was a hand-lettered wood panel that said SCOTT'S FRESH CATFISH.

Scott himself paced, waiting for the right moment to throw open the doors. Jim Buck Ross, Commissioner of the Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce, smiled big and shook hands. His warmth defied the temperature outdoors. When Scott felt it was time, he opened his arms to invite attendees closer. As the group tightened, Scott spoke in a booming voice. He spoke to the audience but also past them, as if he were addressing a crowd of thousands. Scott talked of being "the first black-owned plant processing farm-raised catfish in the nation." Applause and hollering erupted when he invited all to "come on in and have a look."

Before the plant opened, and for a good bit after, workers on the Scott's Fresh line skinned fish by hand. They hooked the slit throat of the fish on a nail, grip the flesh with hand-skinners, and shuck it like a wet pair of pants. On opening day, the workers held a speed contest. One bout decided who could skin the fastest. Another determined who could filet the most whole fish. Someone with a video camera taped the sprint. Eva Brooks, who would become the driving force inside the plant, out-skinned everybody. Her cousin Darren won the filet contest. There were no prizes, save the pride that African American workers found in African American success.

After the commemoration, attendees broke apart and continued to talk in small groups. Some went back inside to look closer. Others walked around the side of the plant to the concrete vats that would hold the wriggling fish from the ponds. One worker pulled out a boom box from her car. When Michael Jackson's "Billie Jean" came on the radio, someone cranked the knob as loud as it would go.

Ellen Joy Sasaki



A group of women workers, dressed in black Lee jeans, picked up the beat and juked across the dirt. The workers pulled Scott and Isaac onto the makeshift dance floor. The men let loose, too. The two farmers flailed and stomped to the music. A worker described their motions as "wigging and wopping."

The women at the plant called themselves "The Dependables." Along with Eva Brooks, Lillie Watson, Essie Watson, and Elnora Mullins completed the core crew. They would work long hours in the coming years to keep the plant thriving. They lived nearby and worked any and all shifts, in snow and storm, amid mud and guts. They were tough. Scott's grandson Daniel, a teenager when the plant opened, calls them "mannish ladies." They did everything that the men could do. And more. "We throwed them thirty pound boxes of fish just like a man," says Eva Brooks. "Those men taking their time, we chucked it like it was nothing."

Scott learned by example and led by it. Many of his workers had been desperate for gainful employment for months or years. Scott gave them jobs, and he also offered them purpose. He trusted and inspired them.

Back in the 1960s, Ed Scott had provided food from his farm to hungry Freedom Riders. He had marched at Selma, too. But he made his real contributions to black enfranchisement by tinkering within the established system, not seeking to wholly dismantle it. Scott fused free-market principles, protestant work ethic, and American exceptionalism with a spirit of contrarian ambition. He used the law and the loan and the letterhead as an example for those around him. He treated his workers with dignity. That respect paid dividends.

When the Scotts were away, the Dependables ran the day-to-day operations. When it came time to lead, they led. On pay days, they felt proud.

Civil rights leader Ella Baker reportedly said to young members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in the mid-1960s as they left for Mississippi to register black Deltans to vote, "Go and tell the people on the plantations that they don't have to wait on the elite. They don't have to wait on Roy Wilkins. They don't have to wait on James Farmer. They have people among them who are capable of being leaders." At Scott's Fresh Catfish, a new generation of leaders emerged.

In addition to working the line, the Dependables cared for their children, running home between shifts to fix dinner and help with homework and draw baths, coming right back to pick up where they left off. Essie Watson went into labor at the skinning table. Her water broke midfish. She calmly drove herself home, took a bath, and drove to the hospital, where she gave birth to boy. In a few more tellings, that story will have become a bit of Delta lore, too—like the story of Ed Scott. She will have given birth to her son right there on the line, on the same table where her coworkers were pulling guts and chopping heads, never breaking her rhythm.

Ed Scott Jr. cooking catfish at the 1998 SFA Symposium.

Courtesy of the University of Mississippi

Ed Scott Jr., winner of the 2001 Ruth Fertel Keeper of the Flame Award from the SFA, died in October 2015. His beloved wife, Edna Scott, passed in May 2016. Late in his life, a federal court awarded Mr. Scott damages and declared that his row crop and catfish farming operation had been subjected to discriminatory lending practices by the Farmers' Home Administration. The Scott family plans to honor the legacy of Ed and Edna Scott with the Delta Farmers Museum and Cultural Learning Center, to be constructed on the site of the tractor shed that Mr. Scott converted into a catfish processing plant.

Julian Rankin is a native of Mississippi and North Carolina. His writing and photography explore Southern identity and place.

HALF THAT TATER

SITTING DOWN AT THE WELCOME TABLE

by Mark Essig

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:
Banquet steward Dave Holland;
A platter of beef stroganoff;
A piano player entertains diners.

Photos by Erin Adams

***Some of the names in this article have been changed or redacted.**

Not long after the evening service started, a man named David stood up from the front pew and began to sing "Amazing Grace" in a lovely, gentle voice. He was middle-aged, neatly dressed, and quite drunk. That last fact was confirmed when he stopped singing and started to testify.

"You know what?" he asked the congregation.

"What?" we replied.

"I'm an alcoholic," he said. "And you know what?"

"What?"

"I can't help it. Y'all pray for me."

"Every day," someone shouted.

As he continued to talk, at some length, the pastor, Brian Combs, edged toward him.

The man glanced at the pastor and said, with a sly look on his face, "Brian'll tell me to shut up."

We laughed, Pastor Brian whispered in his ear, and David shut up. Soon it was time for communion, and we shuffled toward the altar and tore hunks from a crusty French loaf.

Haywood Street Congregation sits in a section of downtown Asheville that has escaped the city's commercial boom. That makes it a good place for homeless people. The new hotels keep rising in Asheville, and the nice restaurants keep opening, but good jobs are hard to find. So are cheap beds. Asheville has an apartment vacancy rate of one percent and the most expensive rental prices of any market in North Carolina. With wages low and rents high, the city's homeless population continues to climb. Just up the road from Haywood Street are an emergency overnight shelter, a day shelter, and an agency that places the homeless in permanent housing.

The church fits right in—and stands apart. Part of the United Methodist Church, it was founded by Rev. Combs—generally known as Pastor Brian—in 2009. In addition to twice-weekly worship services, the Haywood Street Congregation operates a clothing closet, a community garden, and short-term lodging for homeless people recently released from the hospital. The church's defining institution is the Welcome Table. It is not a soup kitchen, a breadline, or a food pantry. It's a sort of restaurant, serving a free, family-style, sit-down meal twice each week, complete with tablecloths and silverware.

"At downtown restaurants you'll see a sign, RESTROOMS FOR CUSTOMERS ONLY," Dave Holland, banquet steward at Haywood Street, said, explaining the philosophy. "That says you're only worth as much as you spend. Here we invite everyone—gay or straight, homeless or millionaire."

Everyone is invited. And sometimes it seems that everyone comes. The Welcome Table serves as many as 600 meals a week, in six seatings, to one of the most diverse groups of people I have ever seen at table. An older man with an expensive haircut and black-framed glasses. Couples with babies. Young men carrying backpacks, neatly loaded, ready for another night of camping in the woods along the river. High-school boys wearing bow ties. A man with a weathered face and a teardrop tattoo at the corner of his eye. A tall, skinny kid in his late teens, shirtless and shaking as he comes down from whatever he's on. A construction worker with his hard hat tucked under his chair. Gray-haired church ladies in cardigans. A young man with a crew cut and a bone-handled hunting knife strapped to his belt.

The homeless and the housed, the poor and the prosperous sit down together to share a meal. "It's what Christ would do," Holland said.

I embraced the social message, but the Jesus talk posed a

problem. Despite my twelve years of Catholic education, I have moved beyond lapsed Catholic into a category of unbelief I once heard described as "collapsed Catholic." When, on my first day as a Welcome Table volunteer, I saw a man wearing a three-inch wooden cross and inviting people to small-group prayer, I got a little twitchy and started eyeing the exits. But then I noticed the other volunteers in action, dispensing sweet tea and hugs to all comers. I was reminded that not all Christians promote and defend bigoted laws about bathroom use. The Jesus of the Gospels, the Jesus praised at Haywood Street, broke bread with "the poor, the maimed, the lame, and the blind," as the Gospel of Luke says.

That's my kind of Jesus. In theory, at least. In practice, I had a hell of a time sitting down at the Welcome Table. Pastor Brian likes to point out that one of the most important volunteer jobs is to sit and eat. Many of those dining at the Welcome Table suffer from addiction and mental illness. Staff members describe the environment as "holy chaos." To the untrained eye, that unruliness is hard to distinguish from the ordinary variety. Church employees and veteran volunteers—a group that includes churchgoers, unaffiliated locals, the formerly homeless, and the homeless themselves—approach disorder and distress with a practiced, compassionate calm.

A man who is shouting or stumbling or cursing is shown not to the door, but to the table, and then others sit beside him and offer soothing words or quiet company. When the chaos starts, the easiest response is to avoid the scene, to start wiping tables and cleaning floors. "The hardest thing to do is to sit, to be present," Pastor Brian said.

That proved correct. I started volunteering in October and dutifully appeared week after week. Each Wednesday morning I vowed that I would sit and eat, and each Wednesday afternoon I picked up a broom instead.

As a native Midwesterner of German extraction, avoiding conversation comes naturally to me. When dining alone, I avoid sitting at the bar for fear that strangers may talk to me. As I looked around the dining room at the Welcome Table, I saw people I recognized, but didn't know, including the young woman whose requests for money I had often refused, the man with the white beard who spent nearly as much time escaping the cold in the Whole Foods café as I did tapping at a laptop, and the traveling kids who busked downtown and whose dogs I warned my children not to pet. These were people I avoided, not ones I joined for a meal.

Some of the earliest Christians displayed a reluctance not unlike my own. In the century after Jesus's death, St. Paul scolded the Christians of Corinth over their meal practices. At the time, the Lord's Supper was not purely sacramental. Christians didn't

Diners at a Wednesday lunch service.

gather for a ritual sip of wine and a bite of bread. Instead, they joined together for a real meal. Those gatherings functioned, as all meals do, as a statement of solidarity: When we eat together, we acknowledge a shared identity with the others at the table.

In an essay called "Deciphering a Meal," the anthropologist Mary Douglas explains that in her social realm she could offer drinks to "strangers, acquaintances, workmen," but that "meals are for family, close friends, honored guests." Sharing food, she writes, defined "the line between intimacy and distance." Early Christians sought to redraw that line. Christ had called for his followers to create a community that brought together women and men whose social status, ethnicity, and religion varied widely. By sharing a meal, they forged a community.

The Corinthians kept getting it wrong. For their suppers, each member of the community brought food from home. The dishes were meant to be pooled and shared equally. Instead, the wealthy kept the good food for themselves. They turned potluck into brown-bag. The Lord's Supper was intended to unite "Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free men," Paul wrote. Instead, the wealthy chose to "humiliate those who have nothing." Paul's letter to the Corinthians put it this way: "When you come together to eat, wait for one for another." In other words, share.

It's a sentiment I heard expressed at the Welcome Table by a man

Servers deliver platters of food, family-style.

named Philip, formerly homeless, now living in city housing. "If I've got a tater, you're getting half that tater," he said. "That's the way we roll around here."

Eric, who has been homeless for three decades, works the dishroom pass. Stationed at the window, he slides bus tubs and glass racks back to the dishwashers. After the meal, he cleans and sweeps and mops. "A lot of people think homelessness is contagious," he told me. At first I thought he was talking about people like me and the wealthy Corinthians, uncomfortable at the prospect of sharing a meal with people like him. But he had something else in mind. "People are working paycheck to paycheck," he said. "If they lose a job, they'll be homeless, too." The fear, in other words, intensifies as the social distance narrows. Those closest to the edge feel the need to keep their distance from those who have already tipped over.

Homelessness is less a contagious disease than an environmental toxin, like lead in the water supply. You won't catch homelessness from a homeless person, but you may fall victim by virtue of living in America in the twenty-first century, a society that regards poverty as a moral failing and leaves addicts and the mentally ill to shift for themselves. The Welcome Table fills bellies and feeds souls, and reminds us that we're all in this together. "It's sort of like what the ground does at death," Dave Holland, the banquet steward, said. "Everyone's equal when they're buried in the ground. Right here, we practice equality in real time."

My refusal to eat served as a denial of that equality. Finally, after four months, accumulated shame forced me to take a seat at the table. It was, of course, anticlimactic. Many of the meals tended toward silence, though this could have been a matter of self-selection: I gravitated toward tables where men sat carefully spaced, empty chairs between them. We would nod at each other and eat in silence, finding in male reticence a kinship across social divides. Sometimes the chairs filled up and conversation ensued. One day a middle-aged white man with stringy, shoulder-length hair pointed his finger at me and said, emphatically but with no apparent malice, "You are a cracker."

Generally the talk centered on food. A middle-aged African American man once gave me detailed instructions on which buses to take to a place on the outskirts of town that offers an excellent breakfast on Tuesdays. "If you're hungry in this town, you're not trying very hard," he said. But that's not to say all free meals are created equal. Another day a man named Robert—who was missing his front teeth and asked me for a cigarette because, he explained, "my nerves are real bad"—said he came to the Welcome Table because the food is good, especially compared to the emergency shelter up the road where "they serve thirty-day-old pizza—and it's cold!"

The Welcome Table serves no cold pizza. The standard meal is a meat-and-three, with roast beef or chicken or pork and sides. At least once a month, a local restaurant cooks the food. Those menus tend to be ambitious: butter chicken and salad with cumin-lime vinaigrette; barbecued shrimp and grits with chow-chow; pork shoulder ragù and grilled brassicas with chili, garlic, and anchovy paste. Chefs at several of the participating restaurants have been semifinalists for James Beard Awards. They honor the spirit of the Welcome Table by serving sophisticated food, for free, to all. On those occasions, the men and women who dine honor that same spirit by largely ignoring the star power of the visiting chefs.

The conventions of fine dining do not hold at the Welcome Table. I saw half-smoked cigarettes tucked behind ears and chewing gum stuck to the edges of plates. One day a man to my left served himself chicken and root vegetables before pulling a pint container of cantaloupe from his bag and tumbling cubes of fruit atop his other food. When he finished, he offered it around the table; we declined. Quite a few guests pack up doggie bags even before they eat—slices of roast beef folded into napkins and slipped into pockets, chicken legs squeezed into plastic clamshells.

One day a woman named Candice sat next to me. She plated barbecued pork, beans, slaw, and cornbread, and then slid it off the plate and into a grocery-store produce bag. "It's all going to the same place," she said, before explaining that she had to rush off to an appointment to sell some of the jewelry she made. On the other side of me that day, a man named Darin spooned pork, slaw, and beans into three separate cottage cheese containers. He told me they were for his eighty-five-year-old mother, who had stayed home. He packed tiny portions, barely enough to cover the bottom of each container. "She won't eat much," he told me. "I tell her she has to eat." Darin slipped his mother's food into his backpack, then plated up his own meal and picked up a fork.

Mark Essig is the author of Lesser Beasts: A Snout-to-Tail History of the Humble Pig. *His essay on Popcorn Sutton appeared in the fall 2015 issue of* Gravy.

Photos courtesy of Alexis Diao

GROWING UP "MIX-MIX"

FILIPINO IDENTITY IN THE FLORIDA PANHANDLE

by Alexis Diao

The Diao family in the Philippines. The author's father is second from right.

GREGORIO ELEUTERIO Diao sat on the steps of the Denver, Colorado State Capitol, looking directly at the camera before him. As the shutter clicked, a nervous, thoughtful smile spread across his face. He was a long way from his childhood home in the Philippines. It was the mid-1960s. Denver was likely the farthest my grandfather had ever traveled from a body of water.

Sixty years later, that picture hangs in my bedroom. No matter how much I stare, I can't tell what my grandfather is thinking or feeling. That's what I like about the picture. I get to fill in the blanks.

Gregorio, or *Lolo*—an affectionate term for "grandfather"—was a *Balikbayan*. That means he left and then returned to the Philippines. When he migrated to the United States, where he eventually earned a master's degree in agricultural engineering, he initially had to leave his wife and six children, including my father, at home.

Lolo's trip to America inspired my father, his youngest son, to make the same passage. After settling in the States, he earned a master's degree and then a doctorate in economics from Florida State University. He said he chose the Tallahassee school because he wanted to be near a beach. Unfortunately, Gulf of Mexico spots like Alligator Point, Shell Point, and Bald Point Park were more than thirty miles from his new home. Facing down that reality, my Dad, who never cried, bawled.

Soon, though, my father took to the American South. The unforgiving sun, humidity, and fecund soil were all familiar. Like native Southerners, Filipinos are open and hospitable. Whether you're in Birmingham or Boracay, strangers ask where you're from and what you're doing there. Nosy might be another way to put it. Filipinos and Southerners also share a deep sense of pride in their foods. Both cultures are pork-centric, dote on pickles, and value home gardens.

Filipino food is not easily comparable to Chinese or Japanese food. Because the Spanish colonized the Philippines, we share dishes with Latin cultures—adobo, menudo, flan. Rice, always white, is a hallmark. Pork dishes forever simmer on stoves. Fruit desserts follow most meals.

MY FATHER ARRIVED IN Florida in 1982. Then-President Ronald Reagan would refer to this time of new beginnings as "Morning in America." For Clyde Diao, everything was new. He had never washed his own laundry, never driven a car, never cooked his own meals. In the Philippines, many middle-class families employed women known as *yayas*.

Depending on need and affluence, a family might employ more than one *yaya* to cook, clean, tend the garden, and mind the children. Most everyone in our family was raised by a live-in *yaya*, including my parents and my older siblings, who—unlike me—were born in the Philippines.

My father was part of a larger immigrant trend. Beginning in 1965, the U.S. government lowered entry barriers for engineers, doctors, nurses, academics, and other so-called "skilled workers" like my father. They were capable people, often at the top of their class. But they were not, for the most part, cooks.

My father's mother, a stout, strong-boned, iron-willed woman from Siquijor—known for its animistic religious beliefs and the tumultuous waters that gird the island—was serious about food. In family stories, she stood over the shoulder of a *yaya*, working with the maid to taste-test dishes, roast coffee in a wok, and bake chiffon cakes with edible pearl decorations.

But she did not teach her children to cook. Women were not

supposed to be cooks. My *titas*, or aunts, were expected to focus on school. They became medical professionals. Three of them moved to Atlanta and Tallahassee. Today, I imagine them as young women at work, expertly drawing blood samples or giving injections, coming home in the evening, throwing up their hands, and declaring that they didn't know how to cube a tomato or wash a dish.

WHEN MY FATHER MOVED TO Tallahasse, a mere handful of Filipino families lived there. Most were FSU students or professors. Before emigrating, Filipino students would write a letter of introduction to a stateside Filipino professor. My godparents, Mila and Manny Pescador, often served as an unofficial welcome committee, ferrying new arrivals around town and delivering welcome baskets of toilet paper, rice, and Spam (a Filipino favorite born of the American occupation of the islands that began in 1898 and ended in 1946).

Upon his arrival in 1982, my father moved into Alumni Village, a launching pad for FSU international students that my parents would later call "Slumni Village." My mother and brother joined a year later. In my mother's family, cooking was a point of pride. When my grandmother arrived for a party, I watched grown women panic, thinking she might disapprove of the dish they brought. Most nights, however, Mom served ramen, elaborated with mushrooms, eggs, whatever was in the fridge. Or she made rice with eggs. Canned corned beef and ham were splurges.

Filipino ingredients were tough to source. To get the crabs she wanted, my mother would travel to a market a half-hour away. She was once so desperate to cook with coconut milk that she risked bloody knuckles to grate it herself. Back then, only two places in the Florida capital sold soy sauce. Lucy Ho's, open since the 1960s and the first Chinese restaurant in the city, sold soy sauce and rice on the side. Oriental Bazaar, the first local Asian market, opened in 1976. Owners Alex and Amy Cardona stocked Asian groceries and martial arts equipment.

A drive to a Filipino grocery store was the closest thing to flying home to the Philippines. We would visit every Asian grocery in the city, stocking up on coconut vinegar and rice noodles. Most everyone in the Filipino community drove the two hours to Jacksonville or four hours to Atlanta to buy staples like Mama Sita spice mixes and Filipino sausage. My mother loved candies. Pastillas de leche, soft milk sweets coated in sugar, were childhood favorites. So was sampalok, a tamarind candy that stuck to the top of her mouth.

We returned home with the ingredients for sinigang, a tamarind-based soup with vegetables and pork or fish; dinuguan, a pork stew thickened with fresh pork blood; and halo-halo—"mix-mix"—a coconut and condensed milk dessert of shaved ice, jellied fruits, and jelly beans. We bought shrimp-flavored crackers, too, and ube ice cream custard, made from purple potatoes. No matter the destination, no matter what we scribbled on our grocery list, my family always returned home from these trips with a twenty-pound bag of rice.

LEFT: The author's father, Clyde Diao. RIGHT: The author's mother, Carmel Wooten.

Back then, I was more concerned with what I was wearing and which CD I had just popped in my Walkman. Think sparkle jeans, colored eyeliner, and backseat Destiny's Child–inspired dance moves. I didn't see these trips as chances for my mother to reconnect with her life in the Philippines, to show my brother and me what home tasted like.

BY THE TIME I WAS A KID IN the 1990s, the Tallahassee Filipino community had grown considerably. Our identity revolved around food. I came to associate Filipino identity with laughter, extended families, the smell of garlic, and the chatter of old friends in Tagalog or Visaya. My parents and the parents of my friends hosted feasts where we ate chicken adobo, a vinegar and soy sauce dish served on rice. We devoured platters of lumpia Shanghai, a fried eggroll with sweet sauce. And halo-halo, too. Sometimes we tramped from house to house to eat and then eat again. Each summer, twenty or so families would gather on St. George Island to eat crabs and celebrate birthdays with plateful after plateful of good luck noodles, pan de sal, adobo, and menudo.

Southern and American foods came later. The lunch ladies at my elementary-school cafeteria introduced me to collard greens, cornbread, and fried chicken. They served spaghetti tossed with meatballs instead of hot dogs (in the Filipino style). At home, we kept a Filipino kitchen. While other kids sat down to weekend

The author with her daughter.

pancakes drenched in Aunt Jemima syrup, we ate rice, eggs, and fried Spam.

I straddled two worlds. My parents tried to bring me up Filipino-ish. Meanwhile, I adopted the American South, telling myself that I am the daughter of immigrants and I am also a daughter of the South. The latter identity wasn't always clear. I looked different. I ate different food at home. Those differences made me a target of everyday racism.

Along with other Filipinos, I endured ignorant questions. No, I told both kids and adults, I can't read the Asian characters on the tag of your T-shirt or that Chinese symbol tattoo. No, it's not cool to call me a "Chink." It's not even accurate. No, my parents don't own a nail salon or a Kwik-E Mart. We don't eat dog. Yes, I can see as well as you can, even though my eyes are shaped "squinty." To be fair, people often asked these questions in earnest. Along with being legitimately racist, they were legitimately curious.

Today, people ask how I can call myself a Southerner when I am Asian. Why claim the South, a place historically riddled by racism? I answer by talking about things I love. And I start with food and agriculture. I make a mean shrimp and grits, working a recipe from Crook's Corner in Chapel Hill. I know the smell of Florida tea olive. I pour a healthy dose of vinegar in my collards. I hold a

SOMEHOW, I NOW WEAR MY PARENTS' SHOES. FAR FROM WHERE I GREW UP, CULTURALLY AT A LOSS, I TRY HARD TO EXPLAIN TO MY DAUGHTER AND MYSELF HOW I CAN BE A FILIPINO-SOUTHERNER WHEN I DON'T LIVE IN THE PHILIPPINES OR THE SOUTH.

learned opinion about whether cornbread should be sweet. The sight of Spanish moss makes my heart swell.

I take great pride in my Filipino-Southern identity. I carry the South in my heart. But I'm not sure how to explain that identity to my daughter. I don't live in Tallahassee. I live, instead, in Washington, D.C., a place that Southerners call the North and Northerners call the South.

Driving to dinner with friends, my daughter asks me point-blank: "What's Filipino?"

After careful consideration I say, "That's where Mama is from."

Ethnically and culturally true, I tell myself. Good enough for a four-year-old to understand, I hope.

"But I thought you were from Florida," she says.

This might take longer than a car ride, I realize.

Somehow, I now wear my parents' shoes. Far from where I grew up, culturally at a loss, I try hard to explain to my daughter and myself how I can be a Filipino-Southerner when I don't live in the Philippines or the South. I'm not alone. As my generation begins to tell its own story about what it's like to be a stateside Filipino, we don't talk about how to assimilate. We talk about changing and expanding the definition of Southern or American culture.

My dark skin and black hair are Southern. The slant in my eyes is Southern. So is my short stature. I am the girl next door. Southerners have long made space at the table for new arrivals. It's time to make a place for me. For us. Alongside the collard greens and cornbread, it's time to lay out a feast of pig-blood stew, jasmine rice, and pickled papaya. Let's set the welcome table with a breakfast of rice and eggs. We can make white bread tomato sandwiches for lunch. Come dinner, we'll eat fried oyster po-boys and a cobbler of picked papayas and peaches, capped with purple potato ice cream.

Alexis Diao is a freelance journalist and radio producer in Washington, D.C. Her essays and production work have appeared on National Public Radio, Slate, *and our* Gravy *podcast.*

THE BIG TOMATO

BEDFORD, VIRGINIA'S UNLIKELY ART SCENE

by Emily Wallace

NORRIS GOODE'S ART CAREER WAS ETCHED IN STONE. WHEN HE was ten, labels for his family's tomato cannery—SMITH MOUNTAIN BRAND TOMATOES, PACKED BY GOODE BROTHERS, HUDDLESTON, VIRGINIA—were printed from limestone slabs at the nearby Piedmont Label Company using the German process of lithography. After high school, Piedmont Label was the only place Goode, an aspiring artist, went to look for work.

In the 1960s, Piedmont Label boasted a booming art department, distinct for its corner of southwest Virginia. Locals describe an era lifted from an episode of *Mad Men*, when drinks flowed (at least on Fridays) and artists drove fine cars (for Goode, that meant a sleek Volkswagen Karmann Ghia). "These guys thought they were rock stars," says Bethany Worley, who recently curated "Virginia's Forgotten Canneries: A History in Labels" at the Blue Ridge Institute & Museum at Ferrum College.

At the roots of both the local canning and art industries were tomatoes like those that grew on Goode's family farm and the farms of his neighbors. During the first half of the twentieth century, the fruit prospered among the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. To deal with that abundance, many farmers established community canneries to pack tomatoes, which bruised easily and were otherwise difficult to store or ship. The need to mark or market them followed. Initially, farmers scribbled on generic labels. But in 1919, the Piedmont Label Company formed to serve some 90 tomato canneries in Bedford County and 193 in neighboring Botetourt County, creating bright labels that stood out on shelves—a feature that became increasingly important as supermarkets started to replace corner markets in the 1930s. Early labels included elaborate scenes of workers plucking fruits from fields, realistic renditions of homeplaces, stately livestock, and recipes printed in bold fonts. The label for Pride of Virginia Brand Herring Roe provides instructions for roe cakes—A NICE

Photo and all labels, courtesy of the Blue Ridge Institute & Museum of Ferrum College.

Goode Canning Company, Bedford County, VA, circa 1900–1915.

luncheon dish. But tomato images dominated.

"When I first went there, we were doing quite a few tomato labels, but then the tomato canneries started diminishing within Bedford County," says Goode. "When I left, we were making more tomato labels for canneries in Indiana than we were in Bedford County." Goode blames blight and other diseases for decimating local tomato production and canning. But industrial advances in refrigeration and transportation also changed the market, as farmers found new outlets for their produce.

With the decline of the local industry, Piedmont Label Company looked for new outlets, too. If something could be canned, Piedmont could label it: Brunswick stew from Georgia, oysters from Mississippi, gumbo from Louisiana, black-eyed peas from Tennessee, pet food from Washington, D.C. (the capitol food for your dog and cat), and spaghetti gravy with peas from California. If it couldn't be canned—bubble gum, brooms, and long underwear—Piedmont could, and did, label that, too.

This diversity drove endless opportunity for artwork, attracting creatives to a remote pocket of Virginia. Goode, who joined Piedmont in 1955 after studying at the Richmond Professional Institute (RPI) and serving in the Navy, was the only true local on the team. Others, many of whom also studied at RPI, came from Montana, North Carolina, and Germany. In Piedmont's artistic heyday of the 1960s, '70s, and '80s, the company retained eight artists on staff at any given time, not including typesetters and strippers—a group of women who combined four-color filmstrips for printing. "Not as we think of strippers today," Goode clarifies.

Smyth Companies, which purchased the Piedmont name in 1988, now prints approximately 2.5 billion labels per year. In the factory's entryway, three shelves display Smyth labels, including Clorox stain remover with color booster, Goya coconut milk, Mazola corn oil, Texas Pete hot sauce, Bush's navy beans, and Valvoline synthetic-blend motor oil. According to Dora Gaither, who started at the company as an artist and who now works in human resources, only one to two artists remain on staff. In-house brand designers or outside design firms create the artwork for most labels on a computer. Goode, who retired from Smyth in 1997, oversaw that transition. He jokes that his trajectory spanned from the stone age, when lithographers printed from stone blocks, to the digital age, when computers took over.

Goode, whose office nicknames included "Goode the Dude" and "Goad the Toad," spent most of his career in what he deems the film era, learning largely by trial and error how to style food for photographing. He counts as a triumph painting green beans with glycerin to make them shine. On the second floor of the sprawling Smyth factory in downtown Bedford, Goode's studio stands unused: a small kitchen with a yellow stove, white cabinets, and a black-and-white checkered floor. In the center, colored rolls of paper, once unfurled as backdrops, now yellowing with age, frame an oversized, accordioned Deardorff camera. Until recently, a neighboring room housed files of film, mostly hand-labeled. One "S" drawer spanned shrimp to sausages, vienna. The Library of

Virginia recently acquired those negatives, along with hundreds of glass slides.

The Blue Ridge Institute & Museum counts thousands of original labels in its files. Arranged state-by-state and county-by-county, the labels on file are at turns hilarious, weird, beautiful, nostalgic, and outright racist: a squirrel snacks on a canned stalk of celery; a beaming (perhaps radioactive) blue rod pulses next to a tomato for the Blue Steel brand; a blushing Miss-Lou embraces the states of Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama on a can of pimientos; mammy figures smile with blackberries and Brunswick stew alike; and a black man serves himself an oyster that bears a hateful slur on its shell (and in its brand name).

Rifling the archives, place names—as small as Cahas Mountain, Virginia, and as big as Los Angeles, California—prove as curious and compelling as the artwork. Worley recalls a family from Idaho who traveled to the exhibition opening to map their roots on a label. Forget the Big Apple. For Goode and other artists and farmers, opportunity was just around the bend in Bedford, Virginia—for a brief moment, the Big Tomato.

Emily Wallace, a writer and illustrator based in Durham, North Carolina, is deputy editor of Southern Cultures *at UNC-Chapel Hill.*

A HAMBURGER BY ANY OTHER NAME

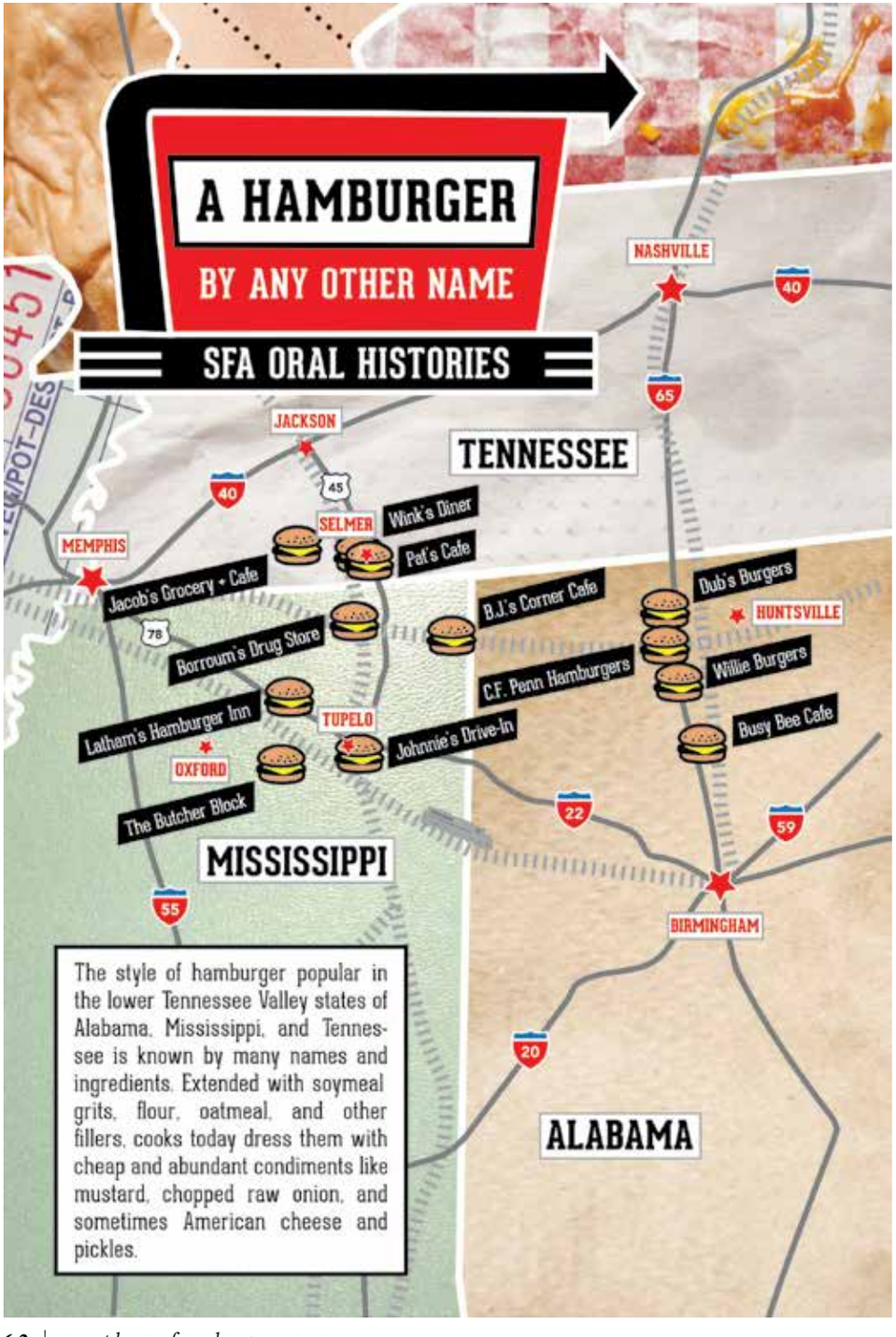
HOW FRUGALITY AND COMMUNITY ENTWINE

by Sara Wood

Burgers at Pat's Cafe in Selmer, TN.

Photos by Sara Wood

Downtown Hartselle, Alabama, with its painted wooden façades and pedestrian-free streets, reminds me of a Western movie set. A railroad crossing frames blocks of a few antique shops and many empty storefronts with hopeful FOR RENT signs. A travel agent, staring out from behind his desk, recalls a diorama in a museum. When a train howls past, the barren spaces echo that lonely sound, and I feel it deep it my bones. But something about the blinking OPEN sign of Willie Burgers gives me hope.



Map by Katy Clune

This is the land of the old-fashioned hamburger. Found in small restaurants hugging railroads tracks that crisscross the counties of northeast Mississippi, northwestern Alabama, and lower Tennessee, these hamburgers defy hunger and solitude in a region where many workers worry over their next paycheck.

Made with beef, pork, or both; extended with oatmeal, soymeal grits, breadcrumbs, and flour; these burgers go by various names. Slugburger, cerealburger, or doughburger. Fillerburger, potato burger, and old-fashioned. Dub's Burger, Weeksburger, Willie Burger, or Penn Burger. Thin like a discus, cooked in deep oil, they emerge from their bath with a creamy interior and a brown and crispy shell. Most customers order them topped with mustard, onions, and maybe pickles. When regulars order cheese, cooks melt the American single by dousing it quickly in the oil. If you want a toasted bun, the cook swabs on more of that oil and toasts it on the flattop.

After a year recording oral histories about these hamburgers, I have come to believe that they are not products of nostalgia. Instead, they remain a constant in towns like Hartselle, Alabama, because when people endure both economic despair and prosperity, they don't forget the cooks or the meals that sustained them.

Set at the corner of Sparkman and Main Streets, Willie Burgers began as Johnny's Hamburgers in 1926. Owners and names changed through the years until 1995, when Willis Sapp bought the business and changed the name to Willie Burgers. Mary Lawson began working for Sapp in 1996, when she and her husband returned South from Indianapolis, where he had worked at the Chrysler plant, to nearby Madison. Lawson says she was lonely and miserable when they moved, but found companionship at Willie Burgers after volunteering each week at the Salvation Army in Hartselle. She'd drop by for a Mountain Dew and a visit with the waitresses. When one of them left to have a baby, Lawson picked up her shifts. In 2000, Lawson partnered with Tony Sapp, son of Willis Sapp, to buy the restaurant. Six months later, he sold his half of the business to Lawson.

AFTER A YEAR RECORDING ORAL HISTORIES HEREABOUTS, I HAVE COME TO BELIEVE THAT THESE BURGERS ARE NOT PRODUCTS OF NOSTALGIA.

Now in her sixties, Lawson reminds me of my late grandmother, who chain-smoked her summers away, sunbathing in a lawn chair parked in her driveway. Lawson's tan underscores her spiky, bleached-blonde hair,

Robin Johnson (l) and Mary Lawson at Willie Burgers.

a style that earned her the nickname "Scary Mary" from one of her regulars. She speaks openly of her struggles to keep the business going.

"My husband gave me money for the business both times, so I tell people I'm the only person who bought this business twice," she says. "This place is not something you do just for the money. The town itself has just got poor," Lawson tells me, as she slowly shakes her head in a way that says she's resigned to this reality but still searching for a solution. "People don't have jobs or extra money."

Last year, her landlord lowered the monthly rent by twenty dollars. He didn't want to see another downtown building go vacant. The statistics for Morgan County, of which Hartselle is the second-largest city, are bleak. As of 2014, almost 20 percent of families with children under eighteen lived below the poverty line.

Lawson tries to meet their needs. She demands that each hamburger be bigger than the bun cradling it. She wants her customers to get their money's worth. She wants them to leave full. Instead of pouring tea into glasses at the counter, she sets down an empty glass of ice and a plastic pitcher of tea for each customer.

She also wants them to feel loved. Willie Burgers, like many restaurants in the Lower Tennessee River Valley, demands a kind of intimacy of both customers and workers. A skinny metal counter with squat, red-cushioned stools barely separates customers from staff. That perch affords diners a front-row seat for the choreography, as cooks fry patties and prepare the buns. In an adjacent dining room, Lawson has covered the walls and shelves with posters of Marilyn Monroe and kitchen utensils from her own home, antiques she began collecting when she first moved here because "there was really nothing to do." She says she spends so much time at work she might as well feel like she's home. And she shares that feeling with her customers.

Tending the fryer is Robin Johnson, who has worked at the restaurant since the late 1990s. Fortyish, pale and brunette, Johnson watches skeptically from behind her glasses. During the long gaps between customers, the women take smoke breaks. Each morning, they ride to the restaurant together, smoking cigarettes and talking of their families. Several times throughout the lunch shift, Lawson stops to brag about Johnson's patty-shaping technique. Johnson learned from her mother, Margie, who managed the original Hartselle location of C.F. Penn Hamburgers, once blocks away from Willie Burgers.

Johnson worked on a factory line making component boards for computers for thirteen years before deciding she wanted to work closer to home. She describes her relationship to Lawson as a sisterhood.

"I just wish more people wanted to stop by and eat these," Johnson says. "I like it here, and if she couldn't keep the doors open, I'd have to go out there and find something. And it would be hard for someone my age now to go out there and try to get something, because they want somebody younger and prettier."

Customers, mostly male and white, stop by Willie Burgers for to-go orders and leave with grease-stained brown sacks. Marking the bottom corners of their bags, those stains recall the oil blotches along the cuffs and elbows of their work shirts.

Lawson talks about her customers tenderly. She aims to keep this restaurant open as a place of comfort. Lawson tells me about the young woman she let sleep in the back of the restaurant for two weeks so that her abusive ex-boyfriend couldn't find her. Each night when she closed the restaurant, Lawson locked the girl inside and told her to refuse to answer the door until morning.

"When I first started working here, there was not an empty building up here and people wanted to be up here," Lawson says. "This place would be so packed on Saturdays. We had four people that would work. By the time we got out of here, we were beat. We don't even know what tired is anymore compared to what we did."

It would have been very easy to drive through Morgan County, Alabama, passing empty factories, and tell myself this is another landscape where the working class hangs on by a thread. But the truth is evident in the staying power of these cooks and these hamburgers. People who call this place home survive by holding on to each other and to the rituals that see them through.

Sara Wood is the SFA's oral historian.

Natalie Nelson

THE COWBOY SONG

CONJURING THE ROCKIES IN THE LOWCOUNTRY

by Jayce McConnell

I WAS BORN IN UTAH. MY mother is from Idaho. My father is from Washington. As a child, I spent many summer days splashing in the chilly Conant Creek outside of Ashton, Idaho. On cool summer nights, I listened to my grandfather, Papa Duke, pick his Gibson, singing country-and-western ballads.

While his tube amps warmed, my grandmother Nadine would peel fresh-from-the-earth potatoes for dinner. She taught me a passion for cooking meals for others that has stuck with me to this day. After supper, my grandfather would treat us to songs we all knew by heart, songs we had written into our lives. Until I moved to Mississippi, and then South Carolina, I thought the "Jackson" Johnny Cash sang about was Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Context, I suppose.

Surrounded by loved ones, in the embrace of the Rockies, those songs were swell codas to days of huckleberry picking and skipping rocks over that frigid creek. I don't get to see Papa Duke much these days. But when I do, the guitar still comes out, and he still plays requests. "Little Joe the Wrangler," "The Strawberry Roan," "Ghost Riders in the Sky," and on and on.

Being in the booze business, I have always wanted to shake up some kind of libation that nods to those crisp Idaho evenings, to the ice-cold creek water in which I was baptized, and to the South I now claim. Fresh huckleberries are hard to come by here in Charleston, where I bartend today. (I buy mine frozen, canned, or jarred.) Comparable to blueberries, huckleberries' sweet earthiness makes them irresistible in cocktails.

This drink pairs well with fried chicken, cooked in cast iron; potatoes, plucked fresh from the ground and mashed full of butter; and Hank Williams on vinyl—the more scratches and pops, the better. Most folks out in Idaho have never had a proper Southern mint julep. Idaho has about as many dry counties as we have here in the South, so it can be tough to find a refreshing cocktail to keep the summer heat at bay. (Admittedly, that heat is mild and dry compared to the Lowcountry.) This mountain-born cocktail elevates the mint julep, if you know what I mean.

INGREDIENTS

1.5 oz. whiskey (I use High West Campfire from Utah for this recipe)
.75 oz. huckleberry syrup
.5 oz. fresh lemon juice
3–4 dashes Peychaud's bitters
1 sprig fresh mint

Fill a julep cup (or rocks glass, if you don't have one) with crushed or shaved ice. In a shaker, combine all ingredients, add two ice cubes, cap, and shake briefly. (We call this "whipping" a cocktail; basically it emulsifies the ingredients into a homogenous mixture without diluting it too much.) Strain into the cup and top with more ice. Garnish with a freshly smacked mint sprig. You can drizzle some more syrup over the top if you like it a little sweeter.

HUCKLEBERRY SYRUP

If you're using fresh or frozen berries, simmer one cup berries with 2 ½ cups simple syrup for 5 minutes. Then blend until smooth, strain through a fine mesh strainer, and refrigerate. If you're using jam or preserves, thin the jam by stirring in a little boiling water. Add sugar to taste if needed, and strain and refrigerate as above.

Jayce McConnell is the head bartender at Edmund's Oast in Charleston, South Carolina.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Images courtesy of Willena White

GRAVY

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