GRAVY

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GRAVY

THE SFA SERVES YOU...

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FEATURES

Cover photo by
WHITNEY OTT

First Helpings

AT THE PLEASURE OF THE SFA

In the twelve weeks of my maternity leave this past winter, I watched all 156 episodes of *The West Wing*. I wrote freakishly prompt thank-you notes. I did laundry like it was going out of style. Reader, I *ironed*—more than once. Oh, and I spent hours at a time snuggling the cutest, most perfect baby girl in the world (I say that with complete objectivity, of course). *I could get used to this life*, I thought.

Sally at the office

After those twelve weeks, beginning a brand-new relationship with a brand-new person, I wasn't sure if I'd be ready to come back to work. More accurately, I flat-out didn't feel ready to come back. But I'd run through my maternity leave—and all seven seasons of *The West Wing*. Meanwhile, Osayi had pushed ahead with this issue of *Gravy*, serving as guest editor. And after a few more weeks, I realized, with equal parts surprise and delight, that I was happy to be back.

I talked to SFA managing director, mother of two, and fellow *West Wing* aficionado Melissa Hall about all of this. At its core, I proposed, wasn't *The West Wing* a show about teamwork? Did that explain its appeal? "It's more than that," Melissa said. "It's the best of what it feels like to work in a highly functional office. And you're realizing you missed that sense of common enterprise, whether it's potting 300 olive-tree saplings for the 2011 Symposium, or watching Richie work his design magic with a feature layout." Sam, Toby, CJ, and Josh can have the State of the Union. I'll keep *Gravy*. —*Sara Camp Milam*

FEATURED CONTRIBUTOR

JOHN KESSLER

Photo courtesy of John Kessler

WHEN LONGTIME SFA MEMBER AND former *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* restaurant critic **JOHN KESSLER** conceived of a *Gravy* series, he led with this: "Traditional restaurant criticism is mostly dead, with a few exceptions." He had our attention. The way we talk about dining has changed, Kessler argued. Today, some dining sections are more likely to laud hot new restaurants than to offer incisive commentary or reconsider stalwarts. *Gravy* readers know that we're not in the business of restaurant reviews. We *are* in the business of sharp, thoughtful analysis, and of stories that examine specific places and people to reveal broader cultural truths. If they're delivered with a gimlet eye and a sense of humor, all the better. In short, that's John Kessler.

What does it mean to "read" a restaurant?
I may sound like a comp lit major who has just discovered Foucault, but everything is a text. Restaurants are particularly rich texts, now more than ever as they've become such a significant part of life.

What can we learn from such a reading? What are the larger cultural questions?
Diners look for so much in restaurants today, beyond the contact high of good food and alcohol. Likewise, critics should move beyond thumbs up/thumbs down and explore what restaurants say about who we are, what we want, and where we live.

Halfway into this series, has your thinking about the role of the chef or the restaurant space changed?
For sure. Back to the comp lit (sorry!), but I think a chef's authorship is always a function of a larger discourse. I have definitely rethought the restaurant space. While I used to use theater as a metaphor, now I find it outdated. Diners today look for something both more profane and more sacred in a dining experience—part bawdy cabaret and part Quaker meeting house.

DISTILLED IDENTITY

Can too much brand awareness defeat the point of a good drink?

BY OSAYI ENDOLYN

This spring, a colleague introduced me to Stiggins' Fancy Plantation Pineapple Rum at a social event. Immediately, I was suspicious. I was born and raised in California, with African American maternal grandparents who migrated, not without urgency, from Mississippi and Louisiana in the 1940s. The casual use of "plantation" has always jarred me.

Upon moving to Atlanta from Los Angeles, I'd marvel at a Buckhead condo on Lenox Road branded as a plantation. In Gainesville, Florida, where I now live, there's a Haile Plantation community. I've been told it's cute and charming, but I can't say for sure because I don't go there. Revisionist narratives can be dangerous, but in my life experience, they mostly bore me. In part, I suspect one aim of such marketing is to keep brown people at bay, or at least feeling excluded. Like the Confederate statues that mark our landscape, my reading of plantation evokes a clear-eyed view of history. Others think of hoop skirts, vast porticos, and porch life. To that, I add lethal manual labor, women and men forced to breed, and the strategic criminalization of blackness.

I rotated the Plantation Pineapple bottle in my hands. The name dug at me for another reason. The birth of rum came at the cost of enslaved Africans brought to the Caribbean to harvest sugarcane. The sugar industry built empires on the backs of trafficked human beings. Rum could not exist without that bloody history. Could a successful French brand be so bold as to play on the term? Had I lost something in cultural translation? Have I read too much race theory?

But party hour approached. And we contain multitudes, right? I own an iPhone. On road trips (only on road trips!), I allow myself a drive-through meal from Chick-fil-A. I probably watched 160 hours of football programming last fall—college, pro, and *Inside the NFL* combined—despite the racialized impact of Big Sports on public education. The origin story of this rum sounded interesting. It looked good. Worth a taste, I reasoned.

Plantation Pineapple rum is a collaboration between Maison Ferrand's Alexandre Gabriel, the French producer of Cognacs, gins, and rums, and cocktail researcher (and SFA collaborator) David Wondrich. They had already worked on a Cognac and a Curaçao together. Though pineapple rum sounds trendy, it appears as far back as the eighteenth century. The Plantation recipe emerged from Wondrich's inspired take on a Charles Dickens character who can't get enough, and Gabriel's meticulous study of craft. The

Photo by Jen Causey

two developed it as a playful homage, but the craftmanship was taken seriously.

Before that evening, I had never tried rum as a sipping spirit. By the end of the night, I had become an evangelist, pouring rocks glasses for newcomers, doling out refills the way a Thanksgiving host serves sweet potatoes.

To make the spirit, workers hand-peel Victorian pineapple and steep its flesh in Plantation Original Dark rum. Separately, the rinds are distilled with Plantation 3 Stars white rum. Later, a blend of both liquors rests in Cognac barrels. The result is amber brown and robust, with big hits of butterscotch and bursts of citrus. The stuff glides down easy, but encourages a thoughtful sip, too. That night, a lonely Blanton's sat almost untouched, lightened by a few forgettable splashes. Toward the end of the soirée, the group had almost finished a second bottle. I'd set aside my worries for a time, but I'd soon be confronted.

in Gainesville several weeks later, I shared an unopened bottle with friends. The gathering consisted of mostly white women, and they could not stop talking about the rum called Plantation.

"I just have to ask you about this label," my friend Sarah said to me. She is from Kentucky.

"It's troubling," I offered, swirling ice in my glass. The question marks lingered. I wanted to talk with someone on the inside. I emailed Wondrich. *Eh, let's talk*, he essentially wrote back.

We hopped on the phone. "As far as I know, in France, *la plantation* in French is where you make rum, just like the château is where you make Cognac," he said. "I don't think it's quite as loaded in French as it is in English." Back in the nineteenth century, he continued, the descriptor "plantation rum" was a way to distinguish it from industrialized versions. "Plantation meant that the rum came from where the sugarcane was

Had I lost something in CULTURAL TRANSLATION?

Days later in Nashville, I asked my bartender which rum she used in a cocktail where only "pineapple rum" was on the ingredient list. The young woman, who was white, seemed to blush when she told me the name was Plantation. She turned her attention to washing dirty glasses while I stared into my drink. Back

grown instead of being faked up from molasses and adulterants." It was a signifier of quality and authenticity.

The historical context helped, but I craved brand-specific insight. I got in touch with Gabriel, who phoned me from his working farm in Ars, a small town in the Cognac region. "I love your rum," I told him. "But the name mystifies me." He was open and eager to listen, and also wanted to be understood.

Photo by Osayi Endolyn

"I started this brand twenty years ago after traveling to Barbados and Haiti," Gabriel said. He fell in love with rum then. He shipped locally aged product to France where he aged it a second time in the empty Cognac barrels piling up on his property, a process that continues today. "In the Caribbean, they don't say 'farm,'" Gabriel told me. "They say 'plantation.' Perhaps now, it sounds naïve."

But in those days, his rum business was a small project with distribution limited to Europe. Rum's recent explosion in the US market wasn't altogether expected, especially since Maison Ferrand doesn't feature pirates or sunsets on their Plantation bottles.

"If I was a huge company with a marketing and survey department, maybe we would have come up with something else."

Gabriel recently bought a distillery in Barbados, where he says the majority of his team is of African descent. "The sugar industry is a painful past for them, but my understanding, from my team, is that they do see it as the past," Gabriel explained. "There was great suffering, but their take is like, 'We built this island.' They are reclaiming it, and we are seeing that in efforts to preserve farming land and not let it all go to tourism."

I rather liked this narrative, or at least the potential of it. Slavery was appalling across the board, but countries and cultures throughout the African Diaspora have managed their paths forward in ways that don't mimic the American aftermath. A plurality of narratives was possible here, which was thrilling to me. I am often disappointed by the mainstream perception of one-note blackness. One could easily argue the root of colonization is far from removed in the Caribbean. But if I understood Gabriel, and if he accurately captured the sentiments of his Barbadian colleagues, plantation sugarcane offered career opportunities to some, and was perhaps not solely a distressing connection to a shared global history. We chewed on this thought, together, in silence.

Gabriel spoke first. "I'm still wrestling with it, to tell you the truth."

So was I. If the brand was called Farm instead, wouldn't it still carry the weight of the spirit's heavy beginnings? Does it matter that the average American consumer will read "plantation" and not "*la plantation*," and thus miss the cultural nuance? Does the label perpetuate acceptance of a period in US history that we still don't all agree was wrong? I don't know. Maybe. Probably. But something sweetly human happened in my conversation with Gabriel. He accepted my discomfort without challenge, and he allowed me to share his optimism. It felt as good as any stand-up drink.

Osayi Endolyn is the SFA's associate editor.

YOU ARE WELCOME HERE

Atlanta restaurants stand up with a sticker

BY PAUL CALVERT

Ticonderoga Club in Atlanta; OPPOSITE: The sticker says it all.

Diwang Valdez

I OPERATE A RESTAURANT CALLED Ticonderoga Club in Atlanta's Krog Street Market with my business partner Greg Best. My fiancée, Sarah O'Brien, runs The Little Tart Bake Shop, also in the market. As owners, we are acutely aware of the power of posting a sign in your window. Hanging a sign that proposes restrictions beyond whether you are open or closed has a cruel and racist history, particularly in the South. After the November 2016 election, we began to see a version of that old prejudice and injustice raise its head as shamelessly and as publicly as one might hang a window sign. We wanted to counter the inflamed desire to separate people. We decided to make a sign to tell the public where we stand.

Initially, it was Sarah's idea. I thought of something similar after seeing a handmade sign in the window of one of Atlanta's modern lunch counters: Ria's Bluebird, a diner in Grant Park. Their handmade sign listed the many different types of people welcome at Ria's and ended with the cheeky phrase "bless this mess." Sarah, Greg, and I agreed that a sign reminiscent of the old AAA or Diner's Club window decals seemed the way to go. We wanted it to be clear, direct, and democratic in its embrace of all people. We wanted the sign to state that *you* are welcome, not that *all* are. The sign had to speak to whomever stopped to read it.

Courtesy of Paul Calvert

We looped in our two favorite Atlanta designers: Bart Sasso of Gentlemen and Alvin Diec of Office of Brothers. They delivered a clear and classic-looking decal, white letters on a bright green backing. The green was to remind folks of a traffic light that says go—that they are welcome to enter. We handed out the stickers to our friends in the Atlanta restaurant industry. The stickers are intentionally free. The only trade is that when we give someone a sticker, they promise to display it prominently. The stickers are not for refrigerators or laptops. This is a public announcement of service.

The response has been incredible. We gave away the first run of 500 stickers in less than a week. The second run was 1,000. We shipped piles of stickers to businesses in Charleston, Nashville, Denver, and Toronto. Friends have lined up to underwrite additional printings—our third run will be 2,000 stickers. While we went into this with no connection to a wider movement, we realize that other like-minded people are taking similar action all over the country, and we are proud to be a small part of a broader campaign.

At Ticonderoga Club, we are not just doing business. We are making a statement that the hospitality we offer is available for all people, no questions asked. To post a sticker in your window is a simple act. Folks in America and all over the world endure and risk much more in order to pursue a life of joy and accomplishment. However, we know how powerful it can be to hang a sign, plainly state your purpose, and set a traveler's mind at ease. A hot cup of coffee. A warm plate of food. A cold beer. A place where you are welcome.

Paul Calvert is a partner at Ticonderoga Club in Atlanta, Georgia.

Los Tigres del Norte perform in Inglewood, CA, in 2016.

JC Olivera/Getty Images

SONG OF EL SUR

Mexican corridos tackle food and farm labor in the South

BY GUSTAVO ARELLANO

Southerners have long celebrated Mexican foodways in song. You may know the hot tamale hits: the Dixieland standard "Here Comes the Hot Tamale Man," Robert Johnson's "They're Red Hot," and "Molly Man" by Moses Mason. These classics, recorded long before Mexicans settled in the region en masse, are barn-stompers—their lyrics and beats each testaments to the good times that *norteamericanos* tend to associate with Mexican anything.

Historically, the feeling hasn't gone both ways. For the past eighty years, *corridos* (ballads), *rancheras* (songs extolling the rural life), and other Mexican folk-music genres have offered bitter tales of backbreaking labor and racism in a South that's not home. Corridos are the Mexican blues, heavy on the pathos and irresistible beats. Heard on the radio and records, they are best live, the better for their target audience—Mexican immigrants far from home—to dance and drink away the pain.

The oldest known Mexican song set in the South is "Enganche del Mississippi," (roughly, "The Mississippi Job") recorded in the 1930s by Dúo San Antonio and on file at the Strachwitz Frontera Collection of Mexican and Mexican American Recordings at UCLA. It's a simple effort—two high-pitched singers and two guitars. But "Enganche del Mississippi" stands as an extraordinary account of Mexicans in a place and era barely documented by academics, let alone depicted in popular culture.

True to the corrido form, the song tells a short story. A group of Texans of Mexican heritage flees the cotton harvest of South Texas for better, unnamed opportunities in Louisiana. After changing trains in Houston, the friends ask an *enganchista* (labor contractor) whether they're still going to Louisiana. Much to their disappointment, the *enghanchista* replies that they're passing right through the Bayou State and "straight to Mississippi."

This reveal had a deeper meaning to Mexican listeners on both sides of the border during the Great Depression. "Enganche del Mississippi" is a riff on "El Contrabando del Paso," a legendary corrido in which a man convicted of smuggling is sent to Leavenworth federal penitentiary in Kansas. The two corridos share the same rhythm and reveal, swapping "Leavenworth" for "Mississippi"—in other words, the Magnolia State and the South in the 1930s are nothing less than a prison for Mexican agricultural workers.

A similar cautionary sentiment comes through in "Canto del Bracero," a mid-1950s *ranchera* popularized by Pedro Infante. It voices the struggles of the male seasonal farmworkers who toiled in the fields of *el Norte* under an agreement between the Mexican and American governments. The song's protagonist warns Mexicans who think of becoming *braceros* to stay home, offering his own experience as example. He singles out Louisiana as particularly cruel, singing "I always felt a lack of respect/They say it's discrimination." "Canto del Bracero" features a plaintive steel guitar borrowed from Hank Williams and concludes with Infante mimicking Jimmie Rodgers' blue yodel.

If "Canto del Bracero" paints the South as misery, more positive is 1988's "El Mojado Acaudalado" ("The Wealthy Wetback") by Los Tigres del Norte, the mega-group that has toured the South since the 1980s. With a hard-charging bass and wistful accordion trills, the track is both lament and celebration. The titular *mojado* is ready to return to Mexico after tough-but-successful years in the United States working multiple jobs—agriculture among them. Los Tigres shout out Atlanta, boasting, "I already traveled [there]," and fondly recall a blonde girl in Florida who said, "I love you Mexican men." (They sing that line in heavily accented English.)

Los Tigres returned to the South as subject a decade later with "La Tumba del Mojado" ("The Tomb of the Wetback"). They decry the "tortilla curtain" that keeps Mexicans from this country. Far worse is Louisiana (again!)—there, the protagonist confesses that "I lived in a basement/because I was a wetback/I had to bow my head [in deference]/to get my week's pay."

And that's about it for Mexican songs dealing with the South before 2000. Archives at UC-Santa Barbara's Discography of American Historical Recordings mention a "Corrido de Tennessee" recorded by Martinez y Vidaure in 1931, but I couldn't locate a recording of the song, nor a transcription of its lyrics. (Hey, vinyl heads: Find me a copy!) As Mexicans have made the South their permanent, instead of temporary, home, more tunes incorporate it as a setting. This new wave is still in its infancy. A handful of twenty-first-century corridos talk horses and "*los derbies de Kentucky*," a nod to Mexican-Americans who work in Kentucky's horse-racing industry. Food is also part of the conversation.

The most famous Southern corrido is simply titled "Raleigh," recorded by *conjunto norteño* Rey Norteño in 2006. "Raleigh, North Carolina/I carry you in my heart" croon the singers a cappella, before a waltz-inflected accordion rushes in. The protagonist has "left my sweat" in the state and is back in Mexico—but "without a doubt, when I can/I know I'll be back." And, in a sly flip on the fieldworker-as-victim trope, Rey Norteño conveys pride in working the soil: "I cut from your garden/The most beautiful of your roses."

written and performed by Chuy Quintanilla, infamous for his *narcocorridos* (songs celebrating drug cartels) and mysteriously murdered in Texas in 2013. "El Güero de Tennessee" isn't as ominous. Backed by a hard-charging accordion, the raspy-voiced Quintanilla regales listeners with a story about a Honduran who ended up in Memphis "without a passport." The immigrant "triumphed in Tennessee," and the song celebrates that the *güero* is the owner of El Rodeo Sports Bar, where he's "surrounded by his friends/and everyone is a partier." The

AS MEXICANS HAVE MADE THE SOUTH THEIR PERMANENT, INSTEAD OF TEMPORARY, HOME, *more songs incorporate it as a setting.*

Farmworkers also play a key role in the music video for "El Corrido de la HB 56," recorded in 2012 by Agave Norteño. The band and the National Day Laborer Organizing Network protested an Alabama law that made life difficult for undocumented people. Over scenes of men and women harvesting tomatoes and potatoes, the singer sighs, "Sometimes I cannot comprehend the heart of the gringos."

My favorite Southern food corrido is "El Güero de Tennessee"—"The Light-Skinned Guy from Tennessee." It was cantina has closed, but El Güero joins the pantheon of fun-loving Southerners immortalized in music.

These *corridos* and *rancheras* are just one chapter in the Sur-Mex songbook. This immigrant generation will add to the catalog, but the future is in their kids, who'll turn to hip-hop, punk, and country to capture *el Sur*. Here's hoping that out there in Appalachia or the Delta right now, Mexican and American balladeers are trading licks and verses in their native tongues, united in a common pursuit of documenting their South.

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

Illustrations by Haejin Park

KOREAN MONTGOMERY

From bowling alleys to barbecue

BY ANN TAYLOR PITTMAN

Driving down Eastern Boulevard in Montgomery, Alabama, then over to the corner of Bell and Vaughn Roads, a roll call of signs hints at a sizable Korean population. Hangul letters accompany English to identify a hair salon, a chiropractor, a pest-control company—but more than anything, restaurants. A dozen or so Korean restaurants dot the city, far outnumbering the two in my hometown of Birmingham.

I visit Korea Garden with my husband and our twin sons, hoping to chat it up with our server. This does not happen, as a profound language barrier presents itself. I whip out my business card and attempt to explain that I'd like to talk about the Korean community in town. Our server shyly giggles and hands over some menus. As she scurries away, the kids declare that they are "dying of awkwardness." I switch my focus to the food;

that, I can navigate. The boys share a cauldron of tteokguk, a brothy soup filled with chewy rice cakes; Patrick eyes a platter of japchae, slippery glass noodles tossed with beef and vegetables; and I dig into soondubu jjigae, a fiery tofu and seafood stew.

I'm in Montgomery to research immigrant communities and, I hope, nurture my own roots. I'm a half-Korean Southerner, born and raised in Mississippi by a South Korean mom and a white Mississippian dad, and though I look more Korean, I am decidedly American. Definitively Southern. When my mom immigrated to the States, her goal was to become American. She did, officially, and set her own cultural heritage aside so she and Dad could raise their two children as Americans. I don't speak Korean, and I've only been to Korea once, five years ago. As I get older and try to raise my own children with knowledge of their broader heritage, I yearn for meaningful Korean connections. My little tiptoe trips to Montgomery opened up a new world, revealing a cultural and personal awareness that brought me face-to-face with one of my greatest fears: being exposed as a phony.

I already knew what gave rise to this Korean community in Alabama's capital city. Maxwell Air Force Base has long attracted an international community, though Koreans never dominated it. The real catalyst was Hyundai Motor Manufacturing Alabama (HMMA), a Seoul-based company that announced plans to open in 2002 and rolled out its first cars in 2005. Many Koreans have since come to Alabama to work for Hyundai, but that's not the only stimulus. Interstate 85 connects Montgomery to West Point, Georgia, the site of Kia Motors Manufacturing Georgia (KMMG), another Seoul-based company and part of the Hyundai Motor Group. Along this route, more than seventy Korean-owned suppliers turn out flywheels, radiators, and batteries, and employ thousands of Korean nationals.

The official Korean population of Montgomery is challenging to track—many of the jobs that call them here are temporary. Those who stay years bring families, but since they will return home to Korea, their aim is not to assimilate or immigrate. Protestant churches have become gathering places for the estimated 10,000 to 13,000 Koreans in the area; more than a dozen Korean churches have assembled in Montgomery since 2002.

To get a sense of the impact of this community, I visited a few grocery stores. While Korean ingredients haven't found their way into Winn-Dixie, a few items—Shin brand ramyun noodle soup, toasted seaweed—are available in the local Costco. Seoul Market, a small but well-stocked store, offers an astounding assortment of Korean ingredients, from sesame oil to gochujang chili paste to kimchi. Hmart, a major Korean-American supermarket with locations from Southern California to New York and New Jersey, plans to open a store in Montgomery soon.

I happily ate at several Korean restaurants, noting that they fall into two camps. Places like Budnamu or Korea Garden reach a predominately Korean clientele. Korean newspapers pile up in the entryway, and the staff speaks little English. Restaurants with touchstones of Japanese and Chinese offerings bridge the cultural gap for diners less familiar with Korean food culture.

Korean eating customs can be

intimidating. You might not know to push the button on the wall when you need service, or that spoons and chopsticks are in the wooden box at the end of the table. What are all the side dishes, and which food belongs to whom? Answer: Korean food is meant to be shared, *out of the same dish.* This can be a cultural barrier. In Korean culture, you are supposed to chopstick the food out of communal dishes. That's what I love—the instant intimacy.

All these observations aside, I needed to talk with Koreans. With such a sizeable population, multiple organizations exist to foster better relationships between the greater Montgomery population and the Korean community that drives so much economic growth. I phoned and

WHAT ARE ALL THE SIDE DISHES, *and which food belongs to whom?*

emailed for weeks before I could get anyone to talk. One person passed me to another, to another, each time saying in perfect English, "Sorry, I can't help you," or "my English isn't very good." I would gently protest. Each time, I would stress that I'm half-Korean, thinking that might give me an "in." Didn't work. I was turned away so many times, I felt like folks were wary of me.

Two Americans would serve as my way in. One was Jeanne Charbonneau, a cultural liaison employed by the mayor's office. When she came out of retirement to take this job in 2002, it was supposed to be temporary. She still holds the position today. It's that important to the city. Despite the broader rhetoric of outsiders taking American jobs, that negativity is absent here, she explains, because "whether it's strictly HMMA and the suppliers or if you're looking at all the secondary and tertiary jobs that come with that, they probably impact forty to fifty thousand jobs in the region." Charbonneau helps Korean families get settled—assisting with everything from housing to immunization forms to music lessons.

The other American was Christa Springs, assistant program coordinator at Alabama-Korea Education and Economic Partnership (A-KEEP). I was humbled by Springs, an African American student who took an interest in Korean culture and has immersed herself in the community, forming deep connections and learning the language. She is way more Korean than I. Springs introduced me to A-KEEP executive director Meesoon Han, who first came to Montgomery fourteen years ago with her husband, who was stationed at Maxwell.

I eventually made contact with local attorney Soo Seok Yang through the Korean-American Association of Montgomery. I would come to know Yang; his wife, Doh Ah Kim, an attorney in the governor's office of minority affairs; their four beautiful children, and Yang's mother, visiting from Korea. Yang talked of Korea's history. For centuries, Korea suffered invasions, yet never invaded another country. The Japanese occupation from 1910 to 1945 nearly wiped out Korean culture. The language and currency were

banned, and Koreans were forced to adopt Japanese names. These wounds deeply impact the national story.

Meesoon Han instructed me on South Korea's swift economic rise and the cultural ramifications of that ascent. After being split into the North and South in 1945, South Korea grew from extreme poverty to economic prosperity by the mid-1980s; it's known as the "economic miracle." Han said that this happened because the country chose to focus exclusively on itself. In reaction to their adversity, Koreans became intensely tied to their culture, more nationalistic, and incredibly protective.

Then it clicked. I told Han that I sensed suspicion from the Koreans with whom I tried to connect. "That's right. Oh, yes. That's Korean," she responded. I floated the same idea past Charbonneau. Her reply: "You come in as a half-Korean person not speaking any Korean, and there is going to be a bias against you."

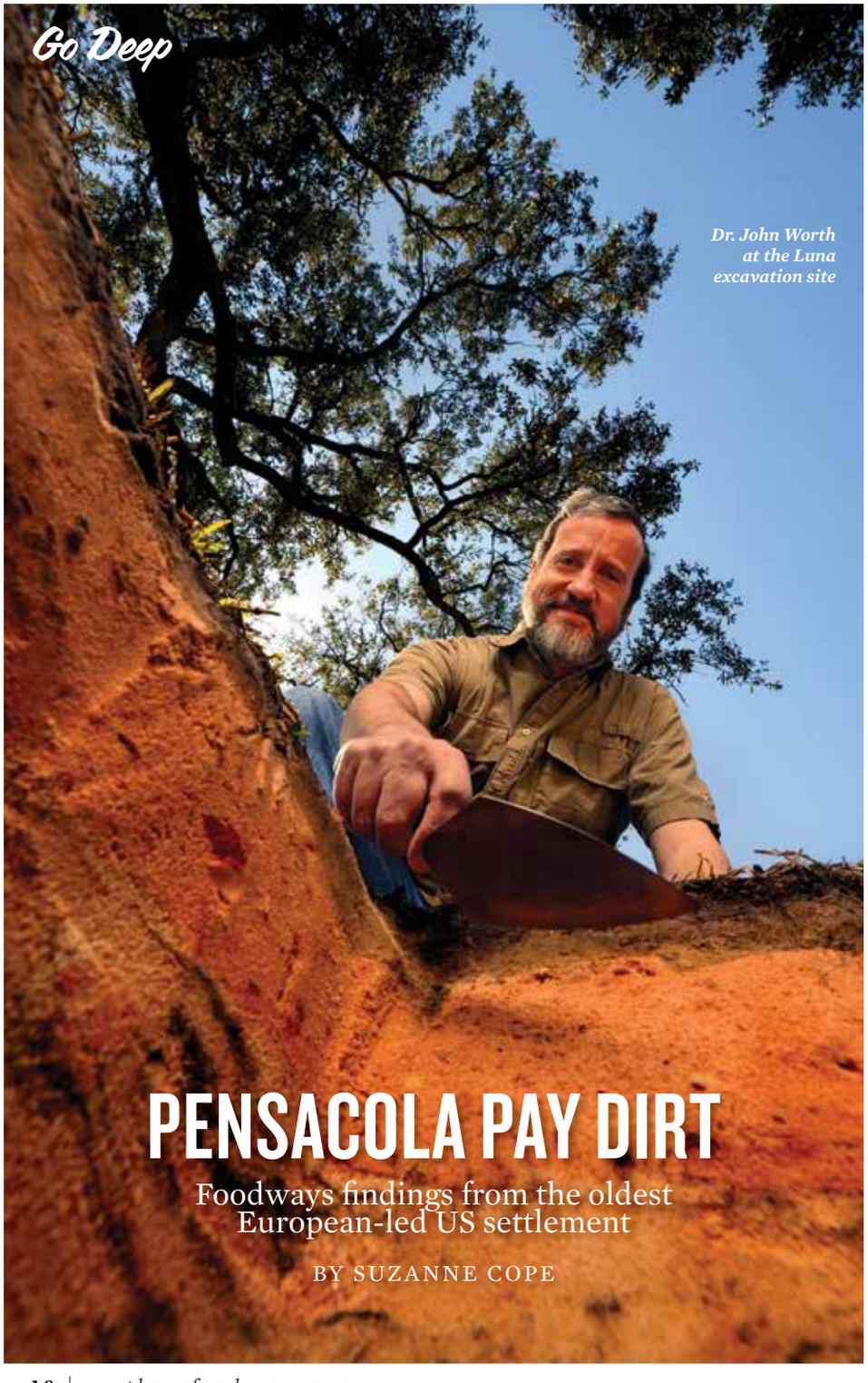
I must stress that this was subtle; no one was rude to me. Through what was at best naïveté and at worst arrogance, I thought I would enjoy instant familiarity with the Koreans of Montgomery because I'm Korean, too—or at least I say I am. In reality, I'm Korean-American, emphasis on the second word. It was obvious to everyone but me.

I come back to the language of food and family. Yang told me about taking an American friend to the new Korean restaurant near the bowling alley. When the banchan came to the table, Yang explained each dish's cultural and personal significance. That's what we all do, no matter our background: We share ourselves through our food. I do this when I eat Korean food with American friends.

Han taught me a word whose meaning would soothe my cultural identity crisis. *Sikgu* is one of the Korean words for family. "Sik" means rice, and "gu" means mouth. *Sikgu* means eating and sharing food. This is the way you eat a Korean meal: You share food out of the same dishes. And in doing so, you become family.

I have since made the drive back to Montgomery with my Korean mom to have dinner with the Yang family. They opened their home to us, shared bulgogi and japchae with us, and embraced us warmly. *Sikgu*. I am a member of the family—a large, *Korean* family.

Ann Taylor Pittman is the executive editor at Cooking Light. *She delivered a version of this story at the SFA's Food Media South 2017 in Birmingham, Alabama.*



Dr. John Worth at the Luna excavation site

Photos courtesy of University of West Florida

PENSACOLA PAY DIRT

Foodways findings from the oldest European-led US settlement

BY SUZANNE COPE

On September 19, 1559, a devastating hurricane made landfall at what is today Pensacola, Florida. Spanish explorer Tristán de Luna y Arellano described the storm in a letter dated a few days afterward. "There came up from the north a fierce tempest, which, blowing for twenty-four hours from all directions until the same hour as it began, without stopping, but increasing continuously, did irreparable damage to the ships of the fleet." Luna sent it to his patron, Philip II, King of Spain, via one of the surviving ships. The storm scored a direct hit to the month-old settlement and decimated their food supply. Through letters, cargo lists, and other written accounts, much has been documented about this first European-led settlement in North America. But physical evidence had proved elusive until recently.

In late 2015, a local archaeology enthusiast named Tom Garner discovered pottery fragments on a residential construction site in Pensacola. Construction stopped, and archaeologists from nearby University of West Florida (UWF) examined the findings. Based on the markings and materials, they dated the potsherds to the mid-1500s. The following summer, the UWF Archaeology Institute organized a field school, where students and professors helped excavate the construction site and created a working map of the area. During the second field school this summer, students will excavate land and underwater sites, where they believe one of the settlement ships rests.

As they analyze their findings, researchers hope to learn how the diverse people of this settlement—Europeans, Africans, and natives of present-day Mexico—interacted with each other and with their new environment. Evidence of the settlement's foodways could reveal the workings of day-to-day life in the two years from founding to abandonment.

John Worth is an associate professor of archaeology at UWF and one of the leaders at the site, which overlooks Escambia Bay. On a recent spring day, he pointed out where his colleagues began square shovel tests. They dug a dozen meter-deep holes in a single yard, Worth explained, and then sifted through the sandy soil for artifacts, refilling the holes when they were done to erase the intrusion and discourage treasure hunters. That work promised to help write a narrative of what the United States might have looked like had this settlement survived.

> *If the Luna settlement had succeeded,* **THE SOUTHEAST MIGHT HAVE BECOME PART OF NEW SPAIN.**

Facing the bay where the ships had first dropped anchor, Worth began a history lesson: Luna, awarded the title of Governor of Florida, was the leader of what the Spanish crown intended to be the first of numerous settlements on the northern coast of the Gulf of Mexico. The eleven-ship fleet left Veracruz, in what was then called New Spain, on June

11, 1559, with upwards of 2,000 settlers. More than half were Spanish soldiers and their families who had been living in New Spain alongside native Mexicans, sometimes intermarrying. The remaining settlers included about 200 Aztec soldiers and artisans as well as free and enslaved Africans. When they arrived in Pensacola in August, they assembled on a low bluff and stored their food on their ships. When the hurricane landed, it sunk two-thirds of the fleet and much of the colony's food supply. Despite these adversities, the settlement persevered for two years. It predates both the Spanish settlement at St. Augustine, founded in 1565, and the 1607 English settlement at Jamestown.

Court treasurers kept meticulous records of the voyages the Spanish crown financed, explained Worth. According to the ships' logs, the Luna expedition arrived with a million pounds of corn, tens of thousands of liters of wine (their primary beverage), as well as olive oil, vinegar, hardtack, salted meat, beans, spices, and other provisions. They brought horses, livestock, chicken coops, fishing nets, and grinding stones for corn.

Historians already knew that Spanish settlers adopted Aztec and native Mexican foodways in New Spain, beginning with the Hernán Cortés expedition. They substituted native corn and black and pinto beans for wheat and garbanzos. The Luna settlers ate chocolate, chiles, preserved fruits like guava and apricot, and, according to primary documents, a ration of nine tortillas per person, per day.

The Pensacola excavation can potentially tell researchers even more about how Spanish and native food cultures integrated. "Here we have a precise two-year time window and so we get a snapshot, a time capsule, of Aztec culture and of Valley of Mexico Spanish culture," Worth said. "That's a really cool opportunity. I'm still enthralled with it."

Ships' logs and correspondence reveal much about the settlers' foodways, Worth said, but "the archeology can tell us so much more." Last summer, the archaeologists excavated a trash pit and uncovered oyster and conch shells. They found a deer antler at the bottom, an indicator that the settlers hunted local game.

These findings confirm and contradict what scholars thought they knew. Prior research had suggested that there was little interaction between the settlers and natives. But the excavation has shown otherwise. In addition to Spanish-made ceramics, "we found a smashed pot in the trash pit—clearly an Indian pot that had been intact and they were using it," Worth said. Findings from last summer have catalyzed excavation goals for this second field school. Worth and his team hope to use material evidence to make inferences about the Luna colonists' interactions with natives from the nearby villages of Nanipacana and Coosa.

In April, the Pensacola Downtown Improvement Board and UWF hosted Repast, a celebratory dinner that highlighted

ABOVE and OPPOSITE: Students, faculty, and staff from the UWF Archaeology Institute at work during the 2016 summer field school

the diverse foodways of the Luna settlement. Margo Stringfield and Catherine Parker, both of whom specialize in foodways archeology at the university, invited diners to reconsider what they might think of as native and immigrant foods. Six local chefs brought the menu to life through dishes like mole poblano chicken and paella made with Gulf shrimp.

Stringfield said that their ongoing work could uncover pollen grains, carbonized plant remains, and other "wonderful botanicals," which will help tell the story of the Luna expedition's original provisions and what they adopted from natives. For the Repast event, she and Parker created a display of the foods the settlers would have eaten.

Their display recalled what Worth said about how the Luna settlement might have changed American history. The eventual goal of the colony was to send expeditions from Pensacola to the Atlantic, near South Carolina, establishing a Spanish colony south to Veracruz: "If Luna succeeded, the bottom half of the southeast might have become part of New Spain." This, he added, might have discouraged the English from ever sending settlers. Stringfield said these foods "are the story of America." Tortillas and chiles have long been American foods, she implied. Today, with the South's vibrant and growing Latino population, that's clear. Were it not for one devastating storm, we might have realized that far earlier.

Suzanne Cope has been published in The New York Times, The Atlantic, *and* NPR. *Her upcoming book,* Feeding the Revolution, *is about the role of food in revolution.*

CONFESSIONS OF A FORMER FOOD SEGREGATIONIST

In search of culinary roots

BY REGINA N. BRADLEY

Sauces, *by Glennray Tutor. Oil on canvas, 2002, collection of Jim and Donna Barksdale*

One of the things I miss most about my daddy is our weekly Sunday argument about food. Daddy lived in a house which my grandfather, whom I called Paw Paw, built when I was a toddler. Daddy was a reverend and car salesman, and ripped and ran as much as I did. Sundays were for church, family, football, and big dinners. After church, we'd come home and tear off itchy stockings, tailored suit jackets, skirts, and dresses. If the spirit moved me, I took a nap. Sunday naps are the best sleep.

Nana Boo cooked the majority of Sunday dinner the night before while watching *Precious Memories*. She waited to make the cornbread until Sunday. We had a regular dinner rotation: cubed steak or streak o' lean (we called it "skin meat"), cabbage or collard greens, fried squash or black-eyed peas, and cornbread. While the cornbread fried, Daddy and I assumed our positions to fuss at each other. I perched on the third barstool closest to the wall, and Daddy stood in the corner of the bar in front of the lower cabinet where Nana Boo kept the condiments. He crouched under the light and rested his elbows on the bar to look me in the face. He sized up my plate and snickered.

"You know your mama messed up your taste buds, right?" Daddy watched me as he expertly cut half an onion into slivers for his collard greens. He didn't look down once. This was his opening argument.

I wrinkled my nose and turned in my seat. The stool squeaked in protest. I made sure to avoid hitting the corner of the kitchen bar, where the broken tiles already looked like a child missing her front teeth. The sucking sound of the knife tearing through onion hovered between us. I sighed, loudly, to let him know I was ready for battle. "Daddy, leave me 'lone." I puckered my lips and smacked my mouth. "Mommy didn't mess up nothing," I said.

Daddy laughed and pointed to my plate. It was neatly compartmentalized into sections: meat, greens, and room for fresh cornbread. The sound of Nana's iron skillet sizzled behind Daddy. Our stomachs growled in unison. In one swoop, Daddy swept his fork across the plate and shoveled a mash-up of collards, onions, and fried cube steak. With a full mouth, he said, "What kind of Southern girl eats her food one little piece at a time?" He called me a food segregationist.

I winced and picked at my steak. Nana Boo pushed a hot plate of jailhouse cornbread in front of us. The steam slapped and licked my chin and cheeks. "Daddy, reach 'round there and give me the pepper juice, please?" He fumbled in the lower cabinet filled with condiments and passed me the red-capped bottle of vinegar and peppers. Daddy didn't let up.

"Our food is supposed to touch!" He shoveled another forkful of country mash into his mouth.

I pushed past my dad's large hand to pick the crustiest piece of cornbread. He laughed and nodded in submission. I pinched off a piece and swirled it in the spreading pool of collard green juice on my plate. "At least you know how to sop," he chuckled.

Now, when I recall Daddy's weekly ribbing, I think about food as a sort of genealogy, an act that remembers loved ones and keeps communities alive. My grandmother told stories about her family through how she made her cornbread, and my dad shared stories of his childhood through how he ate it. I've reframed my definition of family through the way we ate. Indeed, if I was a food segregationist, perhaps it was genetic: I saw firsthand that my mom hated for any of her food to touch. But if my taste buds were as hijacked as Daddy said they were, that was his fault as well as hers.

They met while stationed on a Naval base in Hawaii, where I was born. While I don't remember much about my earlier tastes, I do remember I was exposed to a variety of foods because I was taken care of by a little bit of everybody: Filipino, black, Latino, white, and "we don't know where they from" folks. Lumpia. Sweet milk and rice. Spam musubi. Through food—and *Sesame Street*—I learned to appreciate diversity.

Even with my eclectic taste buds, there was a common denominator: the South. My daddy's people are from Georgia. My mommy's people on *her* daddy's side are from Mississippi. I never knew my Opa, but he is grounded in my memory because of the stories my uncles and mommy told me about what he used to eat. Opa was a mysterious black man from Yazoo City, Mississippi, who got the hell out of the Delta for reasons all his own. He landed in Chicago, then Germany, where he met my white grandmother, and finally retired from the military in northern California outside of Oakland. With each move, he kept the South on his plate. Opa ate squirrel and raccoon—"the one with the mask," as my Oma described it—and encouraged his biracial children to do the same. I consider my mom Southern by affiliation. Though she has traveled the world two or three times over, her food choices call her out as a country girl. She loves chitlins, pig feet, and gizzards. On the rare occasions my mom visited us in Albany, Georgia, Maryland Fried Chicken was her favorite (and often first) stop. They have the best livers—fried hard, of course—and fried tomatoes. Mommy went straight for the extra-crispy gizzards. She'd let out a squeal of joy as the box wet itself from the steam seeping from beneath the lid.

In the black South, food is the foundation for defining what is and what ain't Southern. Goodie Mob's 1995 album *Soul Food* employed cooking metaphors to narrate the experience of being young, poor, and black in post–civil rights Atlanta. Culinary interpreter Michael Twitty uses food to explore African American identity. Additionally, culinary genealogies of Southern black folks continue to flourish and branch out of the region and into the world. Edouardo Jordan's new restaurant, JuneBaby, in Seattle, Washington, pays tribute to his Florida upbringing and deliberately reclaims Afrocentric foods in the restaurant sphere.

In my own kitchen, I keep the legacy of Nana Boo's jailhouse cornbread and Daddy's expert onion-cutting skills alive. My husband, Roy, also a military brat from Valdosta, Georgia, brings his culinary genealogies rooted in Arkansas and south Florida to our table. His love of barrel grills, fresh pork rinds and hot sauce, and spicy deer sausage blends well with my Georgia and Mississippi roots. Among our many culinary debates, the one about what to call scuppernong grapes is most legendary. My folks called them "sculpins," and Roy's family called them "bullets." Nana Boo squashed the argument with a laugh and wave of her hand, declaring both names acceptable.

As I continue to explore what food means as a preserver and amplifier of Southern black identities, I think back fondly to my Daddy, my Opa, and what we shared across our plates.

I THINK ABOUT FOOD AS A SORT OF GENEALOGY,

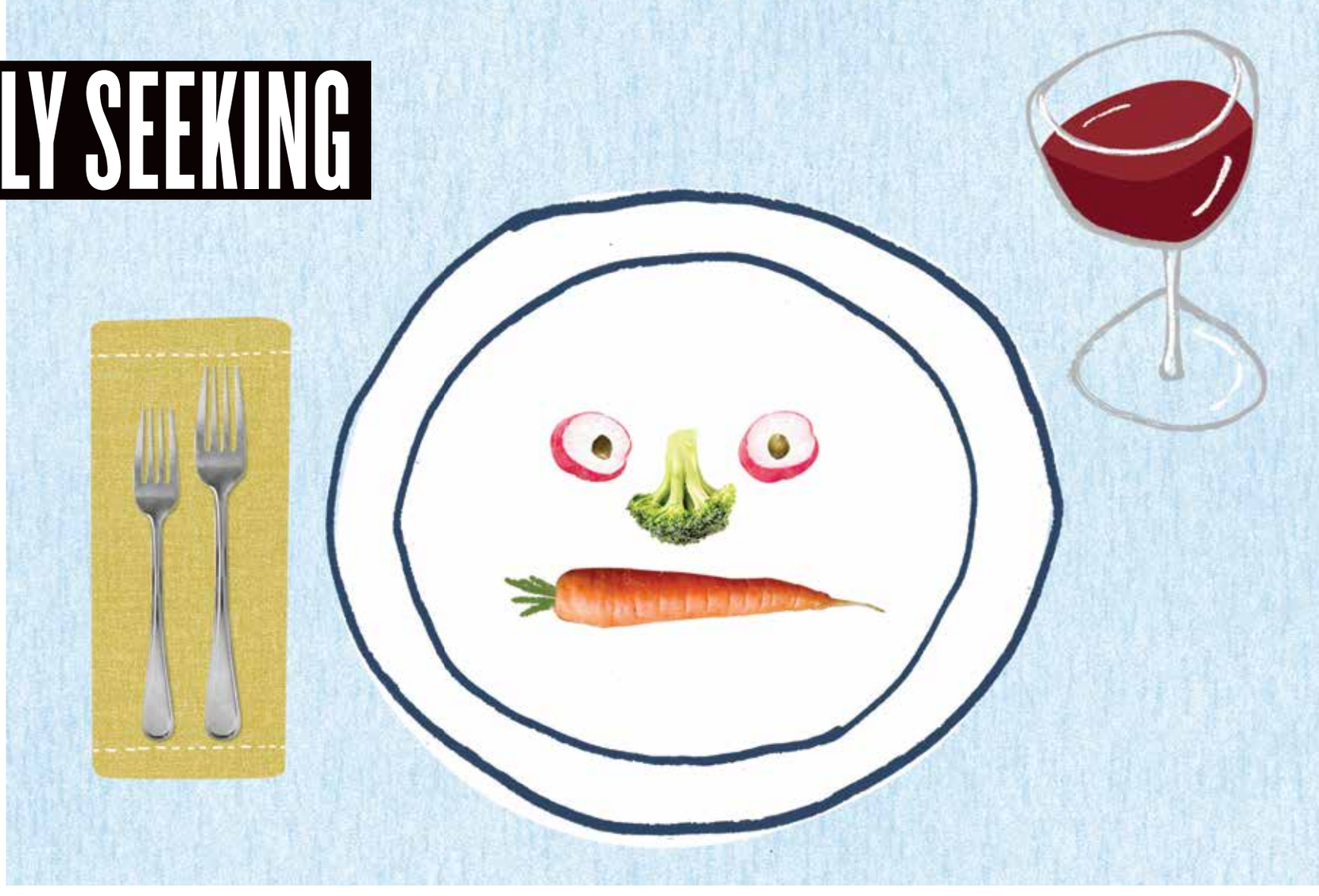
an act that remembers loved ones and keeps communities alive.

Regina N. Bradley is an incoming assistant professor of English and African Diaspora Studies at Kennesaw State University. She is the author of a short story collection, Boondock Kollage: Stories from the Hip Hop South.

DESPERATELY SEEKING SEEGER

What happens when critic turns unreliable narrator?

by JOHN KESSLER



Natalie Nelson

THE RESTAURANT WAS CALLED SEEGER'S, and for the first nine years I reviewed restaurants for *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, it was the best one in town. I knew this because the simplest dishes captivated me, time and again. I knew this because the restaurant's chef-owner, Günter Seeger, not only trained many of the city's top chefs, he built its first network of local farmers. I knew this because I often declared it the best with that obnoxious unilateralism a restaurant critic can employ. I never minded that a chunk of my readership couldn't disagree more. I had no problem arguing my case. Nobody in town cooked with the stripped-down purity of Günter Seeger. No one in the country did.

Over those nine years, I visited Seeger's a couple of dozen times more. I wrote mash notes when he received a Relais & Chateaux designation, and when *Esquire* named Seeger's a best new restaurant in the country. I wrote about the lobster ice cream he made in a high-tech Pacojet. I re-reviewed the restaurant in its twilight, too, justifying its high prices when it was charging $160 for lunch and all of Buckhead was an abandoned construction site. My assessment of the restaurant had started to sound like a defense. Was I drifting into unreliability—not quite Humbert Humbert, but maybe Nick Carraway—when Seeger was the subject?

Seeger's closed in 2006, limping at the end. It hosted few diners during the week but enough on Friday and Saturday to tax the reduced floor staff. The chef went under the radar for nearly a decade. He moved to New York with his wife, Leslie, his former hostess and then manager, whose long legs and graceful carriage would make you guess correctly that she was a professional dancer. He worked as a consultant, developing high-end prepared meals for British and Canadian supermarket chains. He and Leslie had a daughter, Alessandra, his fifth. After years of rumors, then a build-out beset by permitting woes, he resurfaced in New York's West Village in mid-2016 at a redux restaurant called Günter Seeger NY. My wife and I planned a trip to New York a few days after it opened, ostensibly to visit our daughter but really to eat Seeger's food again.

On that June night, we endured some understandable opening glitches. The

Brian Bloom

spotlight poised above our table seemed a scant degree shy of tanning booth. And the ample floor staff, with few tables to serve, tended to move en masse through the room like a team of six-year-old soccer players. But the food! I recognized Seeger's clean touch as readily as Ella Fitzgerald's voice, that nuance that could only belong to one person. Some dishes were new and others so familiar. His foie gras with Vidalia onion jam and baked apple. His hot, tremulous egg custard served in the shell, with cream and maple. A loving tribute to a famous Alain Passard dish, Seeger served it with a salty lashing of bottarga. The flavors brought me back to his table in Atlanta and to Atlanta itself. As much as this classically trained German chef appeared, at times, to chafe at what seemed to him the provincial tastes of his adopted Southern city, he managed to change them.

BEFORE COMING TO ATLANTA, SEEGER HAD been chef at Hoheneck restaurant near the Black Forest of his native Germany, where he had earned a Michelin star in 1978 for applying the French techniques he had learned in hotel school to German dishes. The restaurant wouldn't have thrived without its twice-weekly shipments of luxury goods from Paris. Not everything was imported, though. At Hoheneck, Seeger began his lifelong work of cultivating growers and suppliers. He doesn't remember any specialties from the period, as much as I press, cajole, or flatter him. I've come to understand the recipes themselves don't matter to him. The heart of his cuisine is process—applying technique precisely to the ingredients at hand while looking for serendipity. For instance, he knows how an herb changes flavor when it flowers, and how blooming chamomile can work with langoustine or lavender with kiwi. I would bet dollars to dacquoise that a chemist would find the same phenolic compounds repeated. Longtime Atlanta dining critic Christiane Lauterbach has a simpler explanation. "He's like a Japanese chef," she says. "He coaxes the essence of something."

When Seeger talks about local produce, he never sinks to farm-to-table platitudes. "You have different climates, and you have different microorganisms in the soil," he says. "They make most of the flavors, but most people have no idea about soil. A strawberry in France tastes different from a strawberry in Germany."

"And in America...?" I prod.

"In America you have two feet of topsoil," he says with a quick, ironic German laugh. "It is what it is. I work hard to make the best of what we have here."

That attitude infuriated some in Atlanta and galvanized others.

Seeger was thirty-five when the Ritz-Carlton brought him Stateside in the mid-'80s to make The Dining Room restaurant in the hotel's flagship Atlanta property a destination. It was the heyday of gourmet hotel restaurants, when the Ritz-Carltons and Four Seasons promoted name chefs. Washington's Watergate Hotel was famous for burglars in the 1970s and for chef Jean-Louis Palladin in the 1980s. Seeger was in that cohort of young Europeans poised to make over America's notion of fine dining.

"He introduced the philosophy of seasonality as a linchpin of menu writing," says Shaun Doty, the chef-owner of The Federal in Atlanta, who was one of the talented young trainees in Seeger's Ritz kitchen. "He tried to cultivate this network of people locally who would grow things for him. It wasn't all about luxury ingredients."

It was, instead, about finding everyday vegetables. Clay Calhoun had been farming in northern California, where he sold produce to Chez Panisse and Greens,

I RECOGNIZED SEEGER'S CLEAN TOUCH AS READILY AS ELLA FITZGERALD'S VOICE, THAT NUANCE THAT COULD ONLY BELONG TO ONE PERSON.

the Bay Area restaurants at the heart of the 1970s food revolution. Now he and his wife, Lucy, were trying to get their family property, Ashland Farm, up and running with a ten-acre vegetable farm. They asked their distributor to show the vegetables to Seeger, who found them unremarkable. Time had robbed them of flavor. But he wanted to see the farm.

The distributor brought Seeger to Ashland, about an hour east of Atlanta, where he pulled a runaround. He said he'd use the Calhouns' vegetables if they sold directly to him. He told them to drop his name when looking for other chef-clients and, says Lucy, "It was magic. The world opened up when I said Günter Seeger.'" Greens from Ashland Farm became the first locavore signifier on Atlanta menus, a promise of lively salad, of mineral flavor, of respectful restraint from the kitchen.

Seeger began bringing his kitchen crew to the farm to prepare dinners for other farmers and patrons. They toured the gardens, they cooked, they went skinny-dipping in the pond. Lauterbach, a sometimes guest, remembers the naked swims fondly, as well as Seeger's delight at being in nature. "I saw Günter break a small watermelon on his leg and the juice run down his thigh."

At the Ritz-Carlton, Doty says, the menu was a nightly experiment. Seeger never consulted cookbooks. When he and the other young chefs would go to Seeger's house after service to walk his dog, they expected to find a stash of cooking reference manuals, but there were none. (The only book Doty saw in the house was Madonna's *Sex*.) To him, Seeger seemed half creative genius, half autodidact. He invented dishes when he saw the ingredients.

Seeger began incorporating Southern vegetables while he was still at the Ritz-Carlton. Poke sallet showed up. Squab came plated with a hair-thin chiffonade of barely cooked collard greens in bacon jus. (In his mind, Southern agriculture and Southern culinary tradition were...divorceable.) Critics and epicures cherished him. In 1996, he earned the city's first James Beard award for best chef in the Southeast. For everyday Atlantans, it was a different story. "They didn't like it at all," Seeger recalls, saying clients expressed disappointment at not having their familiar salads and steaks.

To Lauterbach's recollection, Seeger never spoke ill of his clientele; it was a learning curve, after all. But he had choice words for some of his colleagues. "He used the word 'shoemaker' to describe them and their sense of luxury. To associate fresh with luxury wasn't a thing before Günter."

When I asked Seeger about this, he laughed and demurred. "It can be a highly regarded art to make shoes."

By 1997, he was a local celebrity and an important part of the city's civic life, ready to parlay it all into his own restaurant. His then-wife, Laureen, a high-powered Atlanta lawyer with whom he had two small girls, put together the financing for Seeger's. This jewelbox occupied a pointy-roofed house on the commercial edge of Buckhead, just beyond the mansions Tom Wolfe lampooned in *A Man in Full*, with their lawns "rising up from the street like big green breasts."

I had arrived in Atlanta the year Seeger's opened. My opinion would count as my first major test as the local critic. The restaurant showed world-class ambition, with tables clad in Frette linens and waiters in Armani suits. I went the first time with newspaper colleagues who loved their few bites of half-smoked salmon with horseradish cream and a dessert called "Seeger's Chocolate Dream" but found the portions dainty and the stripped-down culinary style disarming. I did, too. Fine-dining restaurants were still fond of their herb garnishes and swoops of sauce, and these unadorned dishes just sat there. They did not ask for love.

When I returned the following week with my wife, it didn't take us long to surrender to the cool pleasures and syncopated rhythms of Seeger's table. I remember oysters, their salinity and temperature calibrated precisely to the shimmery gelée flecked atop. I remember a slice of warm brioche with soft butter, and a course of rare squab that I cut with a bone-handled steak knife and swiped through date purée, as the dark sweetness of one taste pushed at the other. I remember rolling over in bed after that meal and thinking that I hadn't brushed my teeth and didn't want to. Crest would have tasted like a violation.

We returned for a third visit to try the five-course menu. When beef with roasted shallots and red wine sauce came to the table, the sommelier poured a Châteauneuf du Pape, and this familiar combination of flavors tasted unlike any version I had tried. I wasn't sure why. Something about the way Chef chose, cooked, and plated seemed to harness a synergy. Seeger's was the best restaurant that Atlanta had ever seen. That was not a point of contention, it was an evident truth.

As least I thought so. Some readers who took me up on the recommendation let me know that they had to stop off at the Johnny Rockets down West Paces Ferry Road for a burger after dinner. Many were furious about a surcharge for the Evian water the waiters poured all night.

This dance went on for years. Seeger's got some laudatory national press and counted among the dozen or so restaurants that earned five stars from the Mobil Travel Guide, a North American answer to the Michelin Guide. I ate there once or twice a year. You know that feeling of pleasure mixed with anticipation that makes you feel weightless? In summer, there might be fresh tomatoes with tomato gelée, tomato sorbet, and snow-white tomato mousse made from clarified juice. In the winter, a crêpe Suzette that made you stop to consider navel oranges in season. Sometimes, things got weird. Waiters would grate hazelnuts over quenelles of avocado mousse and unwrap steaming fig leaves to reveal a custardy nugget of foie gras within.

I became a familiar customer, known by my credit card name of Mr. Chapman. That is, until I maxxed out the card and had to pull out my debit card and tell the manager, Claude Guillaume, that it had a different name on it. "Not to worry, Monsieur Kessler," he said without looking at the card.

Atlanta restaurant-goers were either on team Seeger or, increasingly, not. They tried it once, twice, then spent their blowout dining dollars elsewhere. My annual best restaurants guide motivated readers to send anti-Seeger's screeds, from emails to multi-page, handwritten letters. The restaurant's business

dropped off, particularly on weeknights. When the Mobil Travel Guide awarded Seeger's five stars, we rushed a photographer to the restaurant to show Seeger and Guillaume celebrating. They toasted with Champagne, then finished the bottle and went home. There were no guests on the books that evening.

Some rich, food-obsessed friends who never liked Seeger's took my wife and me there one evening to try and understand my passion for it. We had the Heisenberg Uncertainty dinner. They were expecting a disappointment; I feared one. Sure enough, we had the worst table in the house, slow service, an uneven menu, and a waiter who misidentified every cheese on the cart. I can still tell you that the baby turbot fillet I ate that night had a revelatory crisp-yielding texture and came dotted with slivers of picholine olive, plumped Zante currants, and teeny-tiny, Barbie-doll brunoise of crouton. But I kind of saw their point.

Others loved Seeger's with fervor. C.J. Bolster, an Atlanta management consultant whose late wife, Barbara Petit, crusaded for good food and chaired the board of Georgia Organics, thought it the best restaurant in America. For Petit's fiftieth birthday, he took her on a coast-to-coast eating tour that included much of the rest of the Mobil five-star list. Compared to The French Laundry, Chez Panisse, Charlie Trotter's, Le Bernardin, and The Inn at Little Washington, "Seeger's was by far the best," Bolster recalls. "I don't want to put down those other places, but it stood out for the intensity of the flavors, the orchestration of the different courses, the timing of the ingredients in terms of the year."

That's the thing. To love Seeger's food, you really have to love seasonal vegetables. Not just say you love vegetables because they're pretty and good for you, when really you'd rather have a cheeseburger. No, you have to be the kind of person who gets blown away by green leaves.

Tucker Taylor, who formerly ran Woodland Gardens organic farm in Georgia, recalls a dinner Seeger hosted for local growers. "Out came these huge white plates, and on each was one whole leaf of Swiss chard, perfectly cooked." Taylor, now the director of culinary gardens for Kendall-Jackson Wines in California, laughs at the memory. "It was such a funny sight but, you know, that's how I like to eat."

Beyond the food, Seeger's detractors complained endlessly of something Southerners abhor: "snooty service." Unsmiling women in black skirts and white lace aprons brought cloche-topped dishes out on silver trays for unisex-suited waiters to briefly identify and place before diners with a paucity of warm fuzzies. The lack of chitchat left many Atlantans cold. That attitude also played into a self-loathing narrative of post-Olympics Atlanta—that the city was trying too hard at "cosmopolitan" and failing.

For the first time, Seeger looked outside of Atlanta for marketing help, and he retained Simone Rathlé, a Washington, DC, publicist who burnished the image of national clients. She softened the interior and talked Seeger into pouring tap water for diners who requested it. She persuaded him to add a Friday lunch service and addressed the biggest Atlanta bugaboo of all: the lack of valet parking. No longer would diners park their cars out back and walk up a flight of stairs. Instead, they drove to what Rathlé called the *Marquise de la Porte* (an elaborate tent) and let a smiling hostess escort them to the front door. I went for lunch and wrote a column about the changes at Seeger's. I said that the food was exquisite, joked that *Marquise de la Porte* sounded like a French courtesan, and didn't mention that I was one of three diners in the restaurant.

Natalie Nelson

Readers responded with outrage. "How can you spend that kind of money on lunch?" "Why don't you write about restaurants that real people can afford?"

Determined to stop losing money, Seeger announced his decision to close in 2006. Suddenly, everyone in Atlanta wanted a table for one last meal. He extended the closing date by a month, and then another. Guests grabbed 9 P.M. Wednesday tables.

"I think Atlanta has been incredibly unfair to him," sniffs Lauterbach.

AFTER MY EARLY VISIT TO GÜNTER SEEGER NY last year, the New York press began weighing in, not as favorably as one would expect. Steve Cuozzo, writing in the *New York Post*, called it "pricey, presumptuous, and pretentious" in a review that came off as incurious and slapdash. Daniel Wenger wrote a brief in *The New Yorker* that dismissed the cooking approach as "club food" "for the low-key rich." I bristled when I read that: Simple does not mean safe. Pete Wells in *The New York Times* showed insight into Seeger's approach, writing, "When you're surprised by his cooking, it's because the voice of the ingredients is coming through more clearly than you're used to." Yet he found one of his three meals inconsistent and only awarded the restaurant two stars out of four.

I returned this past winter to Günter Seeger NY. I tried to not succumb to nostalgia and instead look at the restaurant and the chef with a fresh critical eye. The restaurant had recently received a Michelin star, and the house was full on a Tuesday night. The lighting was easier, and the decor of the long, deep room had softened. The gorgeous kitchen in the back looked more like a glowing workshop than an operating bay. This redux restaurant seemed to have breathed in the spirit of the old Seeger's. When Chef stopped by the table, he told me, "We have more people coming from Atlanta than anywhere else." That didn't surprise me: Once you know Seeger's food, you crave it.

My brother and I ordered the ten-course tasting menu, as did every diner in the house that night. Seeger always starts off with something in peak season. In January that meant a coupe of citrus supremes in peppery olive oil. Then it meant whole leaves of purple Treviso lettuce in a mild anchovy dressing. Some might see a fruit cup and a Caesar salad; I tasted winter, bitter and sweet.

I knew what was coming: something rich to stop you cold. That night, it was a bowl of black truffle–flecked, soft-scrambled egg, tiled with black truffle slices. Sauerkraut with scallop mousse followed. Then lobster with spaetzle. The squab with date purée, a familiar thrill. A fantastic wedge of hard tomme. A lemon sorbet with the long finish of an aged chenin blanc closed the meal, mirroring the citrus at the beginning.

Was the meal uneven? I could find faults. The scallop mousse didn't offer as much flavor as the sauerkraut asked for. A raspberry tartelette dessert had a crust so firm it skittered off the plate when we tried to cut it with a fork. But I don't care about an uneven course here and there. After twenty years of groking Günter Seeger's food, I'm here to tell you he's the best cook I have ever known.

He finds the most expressive ingredients of the growing moment and presents them without an iota of pretension. He cuts right to the essence of things. To me, he is Oracle in *The Matrix*: a plainspoken conduit to a deeper engagement with reality. I think he was able to communicate that to the chefs and farmers he worked with. I suspect even his detractors in Atlanta saw this gift. He was the first chef to say, "Look what we can grow here."

Today, Atlanta goes nuts for micro-seasonality. When kale bolts, the flowers appear on menus around town. If you get me drunk, I will tell you that the best kale flowers taste like lemon pepper wings. Seeger taught us to pay attention. He made possible the kind of stripped-clean, farm-forward style of Southern cooking practiced by Miller Union's Steven Satterfield and others.

On a visit to Atlanta this May, I had a meal at Poor Hendrix, a casual restaurant and bar run by Seeger's last (and best) pastry chef, Aaron Russell. In a Seeger-esque move, Russell serves separate menus in the bar and dining room, and doesn't allow crossover. (The customer isn't always right—if you have a vision, you execute it.) After living in Chicago for nearly two years, where vegetables tend to be used as vehicles for fat and sauce, I was craving a big-ass summer salad. Russell didn't disappoint, serving a mound of frilly torn greens outfitted with peanuts, pickled green beans, and a few shavings of Manchego cheese. I recognized the guy sitting next to me as the farmer who used to sell peaches at the Decatur Farmers Market. It felt good to be back.

Seeger alums fill the kitchens of greater Atlanta, from Dave Roberts at Community Q BBQ to Daniel Porubiansky of Century House Tavern. Maybe none are national stars, but all place a premium on ingredients and technique. "He doesn't have an heir apparent, but he has had an influence on a vast number of people," says Lauterbach. These chefs prepare modest dishes with uncommon care, and in my nostalgia I taste a shadow of Seeger in their food.

ON MY LAST VISIT TO NEW YORK IN THE early spring of this year, I stopped by the restaurant one afternoon to say hi, even though I didn't have the time or budget to dine. Seeger and his team of five cooks were preparing a dinner for La Paulée de New York, an annual festival of Burgundy wine. One young chef whacked abalone shells with a knife to relax the meat inside, while another prepared meticulous brunoise dice of cucumber. Seeger's wife, Leslie, filled mint julep cups with white roses for the tables.

"There's the Pacojet!" I exclaimed, remembering the lobster ice cream of a decade ago. "It's been sitting in my parents' basement in Atlanta this whole time," Leslie laughed. I remembered how skilled she was as a maître d', how she humanized the restaurant with her good-natured Southern manners.

I asked him how the produce in New York compared to that in Atlanta. As with his early days in Atlanta, he has given up on getting it delivered because too much comes in past its peak. The only way he can get the produce he wants is to personally shop at the Union Square Greenmarket and hand-select the vegetables.

"Everything is so different here," he said. "When I went to the Morningside Farmers Market [in Atlanta], there would be five or six guys and everything was incredibly pristine. Union Square is twenty times bigger, but you have to look hard for the two or three guys you like."

"You know what, though, John," he said, lowering his voice and leaning in. "I will tell you something. It's better in Atlanta."

That doesn't surprise me. The farms are closer, the growing season longer, and thirty-two years ago a newly arrived German chef demanded the best.

John Kessler is the former longtime restaurant critic for The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. *He is working on a book with The Giving Kitchen, Atlanta's lifeline to hospitality workers in need.*

Photos by Gary Clark

GRAVY
SUMMER 2017

HIGHWAY 220
Daddy Lessons

BOILED PEANUTS AND PEACHES BY THE CAROLINA ROADSIDE

by Cynthia R. Greenlee

My father forgets to chew.

The nursing assistant tells him, "Chew, chew, chew." Then, she reminds him to swallow—a command that swells with gentle forcefulness at each repetition. He eats the "mechanical diet" for people who have difficulty swallowing, and today's meal is a beige mishmash of minced chicken and potatoes, served with a thickened soda.

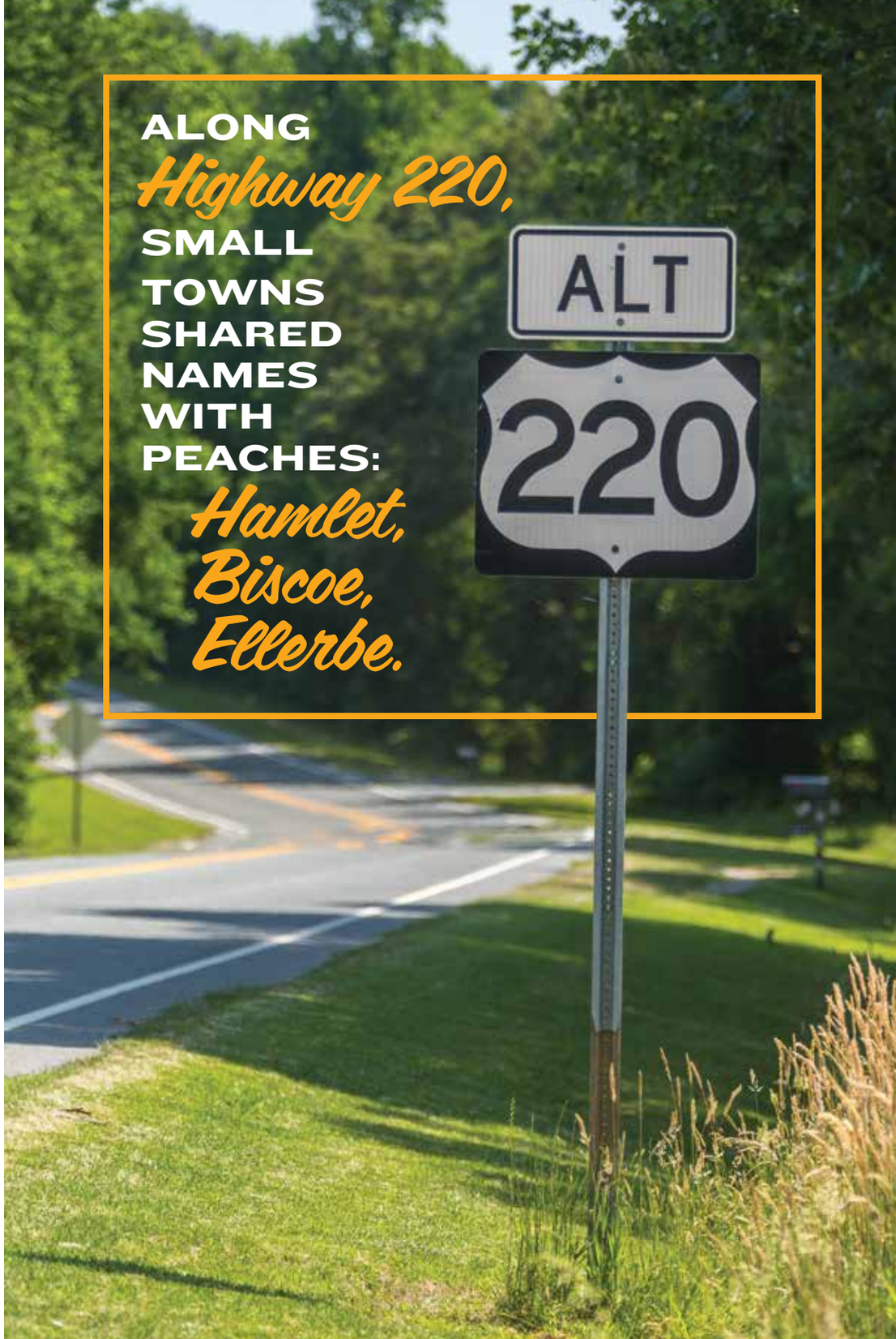
Not for the first time, I think that there is a difference between feeding and eating, between eating for pleasure and eating for maintenance. I watch the thrice-daily drama of mealtime on my regular visits to the retirement facility that is now his home. It usually involves his refusal to eat, the word "slop," and demands for special dishes—as if the nursing home dining hall is run by short-order cooks or personal chefs. If it's a "good/bad day," meaning he's lucid enough to speak, but agitated enough to demand without inhibition, he will complain loudly about the lack of salt and pepper in his Salisbury steak. He'll say, "No seasoning," and then point to the kitchen. "No black people in there."

I secretly enjoy these uncomfortable exchanges because my father has always been a "race man." His outbursts remind me that some things have not changed. Before dementia turned my father into a person whose basic bodily functions need prompting, he was a doer. A master gardener, an eater, and a patriarch, he commanded respect and took the wheel of our family's sky blue Caprice Classic.

A few times a year, my mother loaded the car with suitcases, children, and pets. We headed south from Greensboro, North Carolina, down old Highway 220 toward my mother's hometown of Lake City, South Carolina, to my grandparents' farm, where there was still a barn of curing tobacco, fields of soybeans, and water pumps outside. My six-year-old self prayed for a rare fast-food stop at Hardee's. More than a hot dog Carolina-style with chili, slaw and onions, I anticipated our roadside stops along the less busy stretches of Highway 220, where nearby small towns shared names with peaches: Hamlet, Biscoe, Ellerbe.

Memory is a fickle, suggestible thing, but I remember one trip in particular. I was just into my elementary school career, probably summer 1980 or so. I was old enough to recite the alphabet without singing it, but young enough that I still clutched thick, foot-long pencils to write. I wore lacy socks underneath my sandals. A man at a roadside stand outside Ellerbe, North Carolina, swatted a mosquito with one hand and handed my mother a small wooden basket of just-weighed peaches with the other. Sweat beads on his brow, he laid the change from her five-dollar bill on the counter. Young as I was, I knew that we would not be coming back to this fruit stand during next summer's pilgrimage.

With as much certainty as I knew that Grandmother Daniels would have a seven-layer chocolate cake waiting for



my arrival, I understood that not putting a black person's change in their hand was an unsubtle insult. Daddy had taught me that much. No matter what the law said about equality, this white man with the permanent suntan and the choice peaches probably thought that touching a black woman's hand—even the hand of the perfectly coiffed, brown-skinned Mary Tyler Moore lookalike who was my mother—was a breach of white supremacist etiquette. Or maybe it was an omission. After all, he *was* sweating. Maybe he was kind to not extend his moist, slippery hand.

Daddy was away from the car, stretching his legs in the shade, drink-eating peanuts and Pepsi from a bottle. Mom told him, "Let's not stop there on the way back. I don't like the feel of the place." He put the glass bottle down carefully and hopped to his feet.

"Did he say something to you?" She shook her head, but he seethed in silence. I sat in the luggage compartment of the wagon, played with our fussy Pekingese, and strained to hear my parents' hushed conversation over the furious whoosh of the air conditioner. During legal segregation, guides like the *Negro Motorist Green Book* advised black travelers of places they could dine safely or lay their heads while on the road. My parents had their own versions of these guides in their heads, memorized after the formal end of Jim Crow.

As we pulled away, Daddy squinted and eyed the food stand in the rearview mirror. My parents marked this location off their mental maps. There were racial rules, and there were road rules. I learned them in our station wagon, on pleather seats that sucked at the back of sweaty thighs—just as I learned how to eat adventurously as our family rolled through the Sandhills region of North and South Carolina.

My father has always been a didactic sort,

who sees a lesson in every life event. He turned my allowance into an exercise in counting; I learned negative numbers years before my classmates because my father subtracted a quarter every time I failed to take out the trash or whined about picking scratchy squash in our garden. On our road trips, he pointed out changes in the land.

"Look at the soil. See that it's lighter than in Greensboro? It's not brown and it's got red clay in places. It's sandy, that's why it called the Sandhills. And there's more bushes, lower to the ground." I looked out the window during the entire drive, not wanting to miss anything. Highway 220 marked one hemisphere of my childhood's known universe. Bustling in the late spring and summer, when farmers supplied roadside stands with sun-warm produce, it was a route of wonder and plenty.

A few miles outside Asheboro, North Carolina, my South Carolina–raised mother would sigh with anticipatory pleasure. Without raising my head from my pillow, I could tell that we had entered the boiled peanut zone. My father would stop the car multiple times, half-exasperated and half-amused that Mom needed to sample peanuts at different stands. "Her South Carolina is coming out," he'd tease. My parents had a decades-long banter over which Carolina was best: North Carolina, with its history of poor dirt farmers, or the more patrician (according to my mother) South Carolina. My father came from the mountains of western North Carolina—a place where there were few black people, less arable soil, and a different food culture. My mother's ancestors

Happiness will always taste like a salted tomato

hailed from the Pee Dee country of northeast South Carolina, where enslaved people had once worked large plantations. Boiled peanuts were reminders of West African contributions to the regional diet. Mom bought the peanuts hot and steaming from the pot, or she chose the "rested" boiled peanuts—cold, salted, and delightfully clammy. Either way, we'd wait for her judgment.

"Not enough salt," she'd say of a batch in a plastic bag. "Too hard," she dismissed another. The gold-standard boiled peanut needed to be almost fleshy, firm but giving, same as her parenting style.

We would soon cross the Herring and Peach Line around Richmond County, North Carolina, a border as tangible as the state line. The swarm of gnats that often accompanied the briny, smoked herring announced that we had officially left our suburban Piedmont. We'd gorge on roadside treats like pastel-colored taffy in the cooler months, strawberries and voluptuous tomatoes in early summer. I clamored for milky local ice cream stuffed with chunks of frozen peaches, but my father always steered me from dessert to produce.

My parents usually made a beeline to the roadside stands that were little more than funeral-home tents stretched over a few chairs, a cooler, and crates of fruit. Startup affairs that, more often than not, were run by black farmers. "Let's stop there," my mother would urge, based on a mysterious calculus that involved the likelihood of boiled peanuts for sale, a clean bathroom (if there was one), and a warm welcome (generally evidenced by the presence of other black motorists). My parents had their observations about which stands had managers who talked down to their black helpers; which vendors looked like good ole boys, but would put your money in your hand and not on the counter; and the rare ones who were "safe" and remembered us from the last summer, or at least pretended that they did.

My father would exit the car first and shoot the breeze while my mother would do reconnaissance, looking for a basket of peaches that didn't conceal the bruised fruits at the bottom. Daddy would browse, keep an eye on us, and make small talk all the while. "How are the peaches today? Was it a good year? It's hot out there. And where's your daddy? I always liked talking to him. Oh, he passed on? He made the best boiled peanuts."

To my sisters and me, Daddy's roadside chats and his insistence that we leave the air-conditioned car on 100-degree days were evidence that the heat had caused him brain damage. But I never regretted it once I exited the car's frosty bubble. At some roadside stands, the staff would crack open a watermelon, and they reserved special mini-wedges for children. Or they'd give you a tomato slice and a tiny package of salt as preview of their wares. For me, happiness will always taste like a salted tomato.

This was how Daddy connected with the land. Where he grew up, in the Swannanoa Valley, everyone had a garden. His family's produce supplemented the meager earnings of my grandfather, a disabled man who worked as a handyman to support his brood of ten, and helped support my grandmother, who labored on and off as a domestic.

Even after my father graduated from college and moved to the city, he loved to tend a small batch of our backyard. He filled it with tall stands of beans strapped to wires and grapevines that produced the smallest, sourest fruit known to man. This was his playground, the place where he could experiment with fake owls that were supposed to scare away the rabbits that mowed down his spring lettuces. He shed the suit he wore to his social worker job, put on a thin, white Hanes T-shirt and rough feed store jeans, and would holler at neighbors tending their small city gardens on the other side of the fence. Daddy would sit on the ground and look for whatever bug was sucking the moisture from his first cantaloupe vines, take samples to his local extension agent and ask questions. He'd come back and report the findings to us. "You need to know this stuff for one day, when I'm gone," he would say. And when I went away to college in August, he'd send me off with a plastic grocery bag of tomatoes. His love grew on vines: a little abrasive and scratchy, but natural and alive.

Our road trip excursions were part of our schooling, too, my father's way of "learning" his city-raised children to appreciate the rural South and giving due to the people who worked the land. I learned that same lesson when I went with Daddy on Saturdays to Southern States, the feed store that sold dried

beans, pickles in a barrel, and peppermint knots. "There's no difference between a man in overalls and a man in the business suit, except for their clothes, their money, and what dumb people think about them," Daddy said in some iteration on every road trip. "Even if it looks like they're just sitting out there doing nothing, it's hard work sitting someplace where it's ninety degrees in the shade."

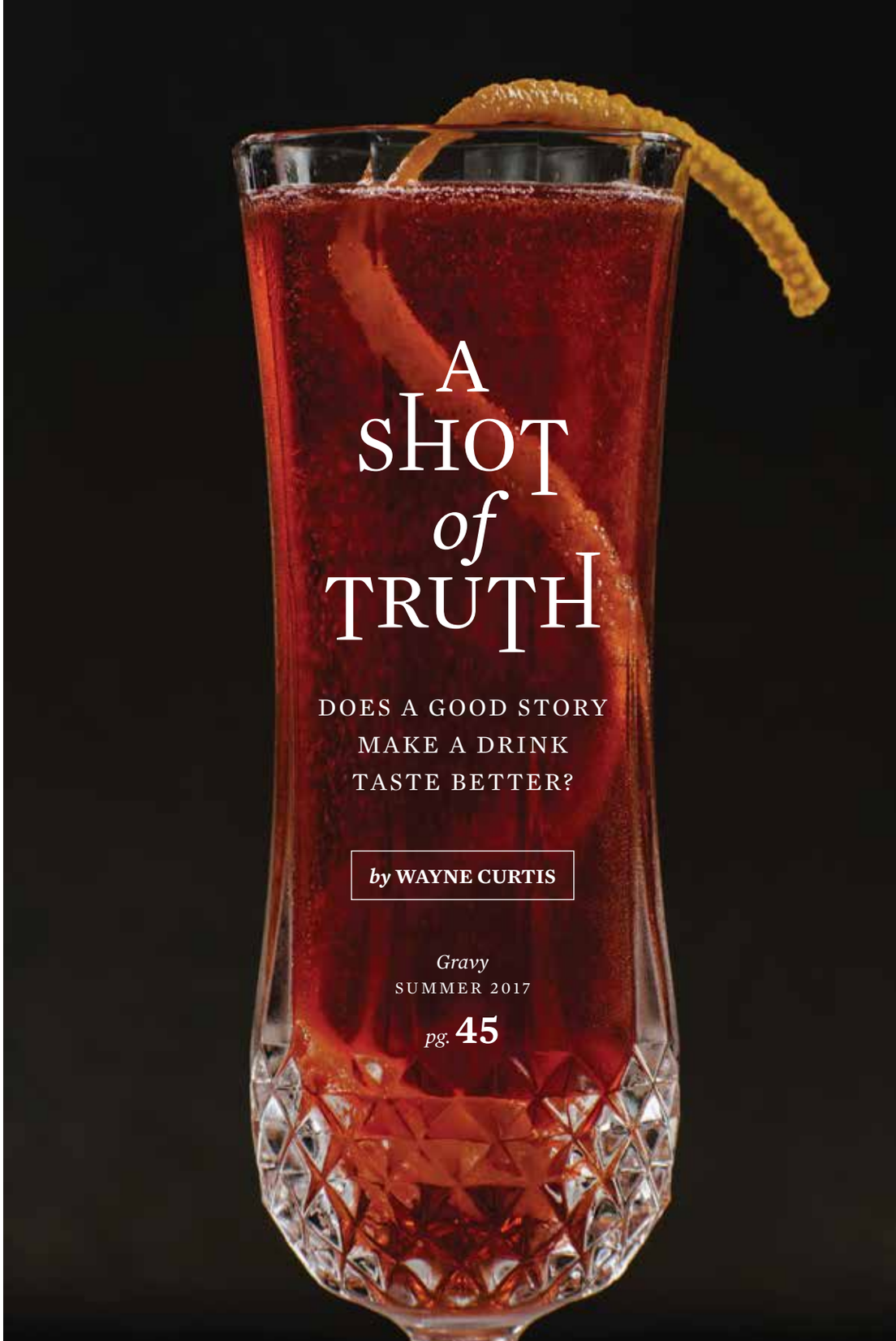
As I grew older, he would give me a few dollars so I could buy my own produce to share. He'd make sure that I greeted black vendors before the transaction, put my cash in their palms, and said thank you. And then—because my father was nothing if not frugal—he'd ask for his change back.

When we chatted with folks at stands, we weren't just standing under their canopy, paying for fruit, and wishing for a cool wind. We appreciated the produce and the producer, the people who could tell you the week and month by which variety of peach was ripe. We paid homage to the small farmers who struggled to stay afloat when the state built a bypass that diverted traffic from the small towns nourished by these food stands. Later, we became one of those New South families that took the road more traveled. The line of black asphalt got us to Grandma quicker. It was a matter of convenience for my parents: less time spent in a stuffy car with three children.

I haven't traveled the old 220 for years. Now, it seems a rude violation to drive that road without my father taking lead. He sits in a wheelchair, unable to move on his own and occasionally unable to remember which hallway will lead to his room. Our journeys together now are short affairs. I push him in that wheelchair from dining hall to his room. When he's feeling cantankerous, he doesn't want to return to his room and literally puts his foot down to stop me from rolling him forward. He demands that I roll him out the door and take him to the bank, the Walmart, somewhere other than here.

Mom walks alongside us, and I can feel her worrying that he didn't eat enough. An hour after the dinner he didn't finish, I watch him eat a Magic Cup, a frozen, ice cream–like treat packed with protein. It is the one thing he will consume with gusto. My father—who demanded sturdy, home-cooked meals and would brook no leftovers—slowly spoons it to his mouth, sometimes forgetting that his hand is in the air. I think, not for the first time, that happiness tastes like a summer tomato and loss tastes like that peach ice cream Daddy never let me eat.

Cynthia R. Greenlee is a journalist, a historian who researches African American legal history in the South, and a diehard fan of peach ice cream. She developed this piece at the SFA's 2017 Rivendell Writers' Colony Workshop.



It was 1917,

and a bartender at the Seelbach Hotel in Louisville, Kentucky, was mixing several drinks at once. He opened a bottle of Champagne and—as Champagne will do—it cascaded over the top. Some of that fizz spilled into a Manhattan he'd already made. So he remade it, and set that original drink aside.

Later he tasted the original. It was fine. Good, even. It was bright and effervescent but still had the ballast of its era. The bartender added orange liqueur, and called it the Seelbach cocktail. He put it into regular rotation at the hotel. But the drink's popularity was short-lived: Prohibition came along in 1920, and hotel bars like the Seelbach ran dry.

In 1995, Seelbach bar manager Adam Seger rediscovered the cocktail. He found it on an old bar menu in the hotel's archives.

The drink appeared on the Louisville hotel's cocktail menu once again—complete with story. Guests ordered it. Guests loved it. The Seelbach cocktail made its way into the slew of new books about classic cocktails, which seemed appropriate for a drink that came from a hotel that was itself so classic it got a passing mention in *The Great Gatsby*.

For the past twenty years, hotel visitors have walked through the ornate hotel lobby and ordered Seelbachs. It's one of the bar's best sellers.

Robert Simonson, a cocktail writer based in New York, tried one on a trip to Louisville about a decade ago. He hadn't heard of the drink until a fellow journalist recommended it. Simonson remembers thinking it was a pretty good cocktail—not super-high on his list of favorites, but good. His experience at the Seelbach Hotel nearly ten years ago was typical. Go to the Seelbach. Order a Seelbach. Drink it.

Photos by Andrew Thomas Lee

Flash forward to 2016.

Simonson was attending a small event to promote a new bar that Seger—now a well-known bar consultant—was opening in New York. From the stage, Seger mentioned that he'd recently confessed to another bartender that he'd actually made up the whole story behind the Seelbach.

At the end of the night, Simonson darted out of his seat and up to the stage. Seger agreed to go on the record about the Seelbach fiction.

Simonson's article about the fictitious Seelbach came out in *The New York Times* last October. The headline read, "That Historic Cocktail? Turns Out It's a Fake."

You might think that Seger was then ostracized and embarrassed about lying, for creating alternative cocktail facts. But that didn't happen—most cocktail writers and bartenders I've talked to just laughed, even those who included the fake story in their books, as Simonson did. Many complimented Seger on coming up with an utterly plausible and enduring story.

Seger, it turns out, found himself with a foot in each of two eras. One was in an era now gone, when good stories told at bars, about bars, and about drinks were the currency of the time. Everybody made things up. Nobody really cared—as long as the story was well told and entertaining.

Then, a little over ten years ago, I started hearing a phrase that I don't think had ever been uttered before inside a bar: "What's your source on that?"

A new generation of cocktail and spirits writers—and I include myself among them—had started sifting through the stories, trying to separate fact from fancy. How did this whiskey *really* arise? Which bartender *first* made that drink? Did the cocktail *truly* originate in New Orleans?

We wanted answers, and we wanted the truth. But I also wondered, what do we lose when we stop making up stories?

I'VE BEEN WRITING about liquor, cocktails, and bars for more than a dozen years. I got into this because I was interested in the history of drink: why people drank, what they drank, what they were doing while they drank.

Two moments helped shaped how I think about stories and spirits—one took place in France, and the other in New Orleans.

In 2011, I toured a sprawling palace full of stained-glass windows near the Normandy coast in France where Bénédictine liqueur is manufactured. Its makers have long claimed that it was concocted from a rediscovered sixteenth-century recipe originally developed by Benedictine monks. In the mid-nineteenth century, someone supposedly found this recipe that called for distilling spirits and herbs and various other whatnot in an alchemy manuscript that had been hidden away, and decided to produce it again.

During the tour, I asked my guide where that manuscript was located.

"It's in a safe in a secret location," she said.

I pressed her. Is it somewhere in this area?

"It's somewhere in Europe," she replied. "I don't think it's in the United States."

In other words, she had no idea—because there was no sixteenth-century manuscript. She was repeating a story that had been made up of whole cloth. It dates back to 1863, when a wealthy industrialist named Alexandre Le Grand started making an herbal liqueur. He knew that it needed a good story to go with it, and so in came the monks and the alchemy, followed by more than a century of fiction that all but morphed into fact.

Even that building I toured was something of a fake—a nineteenth-century reproduction of a fifteenth-century palace. It stood as a monument to how deeply and colorfully a good drinking story can embed itself in popular culture.

THE SECOND MOMENT took place about a decade ago. I walked in to this tiny, four-seat bar at the Ritz-Carlton at the edge of the French Quarter in New Orleans with a couple of friends. A bartender the size of a fullback with a gravelly baritone voice loomed behind the bar. Among the drinks we ordered was a mint julep.

The bartender's name was Chris McMillian. As he assembled his tools—a silver julep cup, a bar spoon, a canvas bag and massive wooden mallet for pulverizing the ice—he started reciting something. He began slowly and then picked up speed, like a stone rolling downhill.

Then comes the zenith of man's pleasure. Then comes the julep, the mint julep. Who has not tasted one has lived in vain. The honey of Hymettus brought no such solace to the soul; the nectar of the Gods is tame beside it. It is the very dream of drinks, the vision of sweet quaffing... Sip it and dream, you cannot dream amiss, sip it and dream. It is a dream itself. No other land gives such sweet solace for your cares; no other liquor soothes

you so in melancholy days. Sip it and say there is no solace for the soul, no tonic for the body like old bourbon whiskey. Cheers.

I was completely surprised. And confused. Was he talking to us? To himself? To an invisible friend? But within a minute or so, we were sucked in and pulled along on this journey of the mind. Upon finishing the ode, which was the length of a short book, McMillian slid the julep across to us. To this day, it was the single best drink I've ever had, anywhere. Not because of the bourbon he used, nor his technique in pulverizing the ice to a fine powder—although those didn't hurt—but because the drink came surrounded by this nimbus of soothing words. It turns out he was reciting an ode to the julep written in the 1890s by a Kentucky judge named Joshua Soule Smith, and which McMillian had long ago memorized and unspooled to guests when the mood struck him.

While *that* was the best julep I've ever had, the story has somehow infected my tastebuds, improving every julep I've had since. The same is true for Bénédictine. Even though I know the whole story of monks and alchemy is an elaborate bit of fakery, as is the fancy palace—I remember the echo of the creaky stairs, and I swear I can taste the monks' handiwork every time I sip it.

WHEN I LIVED in New England, my neighbors and I talked to convey information—rarely more. Those who spoke most efficiently were the most respected. It was as if you were given an allotment of so many words to use during your time on Earth, and people were afraid they might run out. Living in New Orleans for the past decade, I've learned that's not the case here. Information seems to be more a vehicle to get you to the digression, which is the whole point of talking to someone.

Today, we don't so much tell stories as traffic in snippets—140 characters here, an Instagram caption there. We hit send, and then we sit and wait for someone to ping back.

Bars have been more or less resistant to these trends. Even though televisions mounted among the liquor bottles might offer an excuse not to talk, striking up a conversation with a complete stranger in a bar is still an accepted, even expected, part of going out for a drink.

Chris McMillian left the Ritz-Carlton years ago. He stopped reciting the ode to the julep when word got around, and tourists started coming in with expectations. He felt like a human jukebox—strangers would plop in a coin and wait for something to come out. The verse no longer surprised. McMillian and his wife, Laura, now have their own bar, called Revel, a couple of miles from the French Quarter just off Canal Street. Revel has no televisions—the McMillians want their customers to interact.

A 2004 SCIENTIFIC STUDY published in the *Journal of Sensory Studies* examined how sound can influence taste. The title was "The Role of Auditory Cues in Modulating the Perceived Crispness and Staleness of Potato Chips," which was a ten-dollar way of saying that if the chip sounded crisper, it tasted better. This might seem obvious—and a lot of people made fun of the study—but more revealing was the researcher's look at how humans tend to involuntarily combine various sensory cues into one multisensory perception.

I've also turned up studies on how mood, music, appearance, texture, packaging, and the ambiance of where you drink can affect how you perceive the taste of whatever it is you're eating or drinking. But I've found no studies on how a good story can affect taste.

The story has somehow infected my tastebuds, IMPROVING EVERY JULEP I'VE HAD SINCE.

I'm worried that we're losing that part of taste. The modern cocktail revival has seen the rise of the elegant and often pricey craft cocktail, which you can order in all the new cool-kid bars. It has also seen the return of a class of professional bartender—folks who see this as their livelihood, not as a gig during grad school or between auditions. They have the time and motivation to get bartending right, with many of them worrying the details down to the last milliliter.

But deftness in behind-the-bar storytelling is lagging. The new crop of bartenders has by and large focused on eyedroppers of tinctures rather than on their customers. One bar consultant I know told me that he used to teach bar staff how to make drinks. Now, bar owners ask him to instruct the staff on how to tell a story, how to make eye contact, how to connect with the patrons.

As a journalist, I'm all for getting the facts right. But maybe we needn't be so fastidious. Maybe letting a little fiction back into the bars isn't a bad thing. Maybe we should let bars do what they do best, which is to serve as petri dishes where stories propagate and grow.

I was in Louisville a couple of months ago and stopped by the bar at the Seelbach Hotel, after Robert Simonson's story about the big lie came out in *The New York Times*. The hotel is now a Hilton, and the bar has too many TV sets blaring for my taste. But I walked in and grabbed a stool and ordered a Seelbach. The bartender told me that the truth hadn't gotten in the way of sales—it was still the bar's top-selling cocktail.

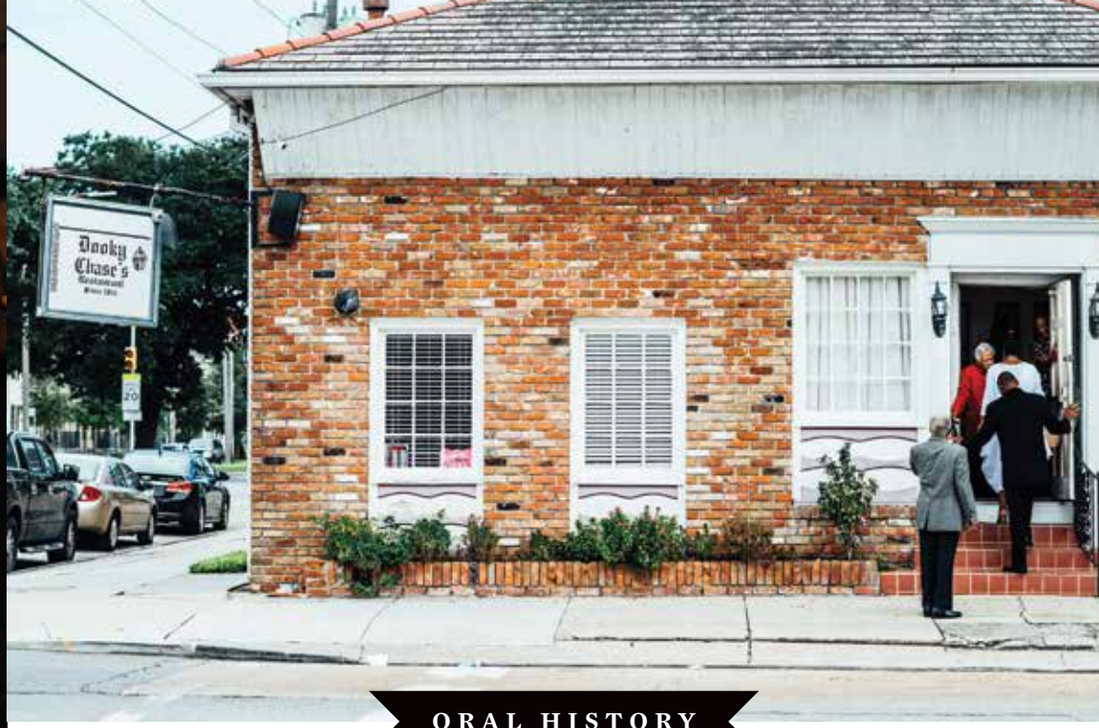
I sipped it, and it tasted like a mistake made right. Later, back in New Orleans, I asked Chris McMillian if he thought the truth might diminish the taste of the Seelbach.

"No, it only enriches the story," he said. "I've told the Seelbach story a bunch of times and now it has an addendum to it, that brings it up to contemporary times and relates it to an individual person and their personal experience."

The truth makes a nice frame for a drink. But I'm thinking the story is always what will set it apart.

Wayne Curtis is a New Orleans-based writer and the author of And a Bottle of Rum: A History of the New World in Ten Cocktails. *A version of this story aired on* Gravy *podcast episode 63*, Booze Legends.

Leah Chase; OPPOSITE PAGE: Chase greets diners at Dooky Chase's restaurant.



ORAL HISTORY

I Never Could SIT STILL

Leah Chase talks of seven decades at Dooky Chase's Restaurant in New Orleans

as told to
SARA ROAHEN *and* **JOHN POPE**
by **LEAH CHASE**

JUNE 6, 2014

My name is Leah Chase. I run this kitchen at Dooky Chase's Restaurant. Been here for what? Sixty-eight years.

I LIKE TO GIVE TRAINED CHEFS THEIR credit, and that's why I say I'm a cook, really. But I run the kitchen. I do the buying. I do the menu and all of that. I've had people say, "Well, what is a chef? Nothing." What do you mean, 'nothing?' But in their eyes, a chef is just somebody who cooks, so they don't look at that sometimes as a respected form of art or respected degree. But it is. In my case, I had a lot of people that didn't give me any credit for anything. I was just a cook.

We did it in our kitchens every day. Every black woman coming along cooked in the kitchen, and they just didn't understand what the professional cook would do. And if you're cooking in the restaurant, what difference that makes. They just—it's nothing to them. And I guess there's still some cases in which they feel that way. "What is a chef? Nothing." But it is *important*. It is as important as a doctor. It is as important as a lawyer.

I grew up in a small town. I grew up in Madisonville. And the older I get, the more appreciative I am of growing up in a small town, in what you call a "country town." You learn so much. People who grew up in urban towns and big cities don't understand. They don't know food, for one thing. They don't know how it grows. They don't know what it takes to bring it to the table. And in the country, you learn all of that.

Then, when you get to the city, you say, "Oh, I can take these same greens I have and I can do this with it. I can stuff this chicken with that. I didn't know I could do that with it coming up in the country. I thought I could just eat greens and greens, or greens and rice, or whatever. Now I know you can put it under different things and make it a beautiful dish."

So you learn, and you build on what you learn. Coming up in the country, you learn the basics. You learn what it takes to grow a hog. You know what it takes to do everything. I think that was an advantage for me.

My mother wasn't a great cook, poor darling. Well, who wants to cook for the army every day? She had eleven of us that she raised, and my daddy who loved to eat. She'd rather sew. She liked to sew. And you know what? Strangely enough, when I came up, that was me. I'd rather sew.

There were no Catholic schools for blacks at all in Madisonville. So I had to come here. And where was St. Mary's Academy when I came? On Orleans and Royal, of all the spaces. I don't think you could run a good school in the French Quarter today. Kids are too curious.

When I came out of school, I went back home. There was no work at home but housework, so we did that. I worked for a lady who had a boarding house, Koep's Boarding House. I cleaned, washed some clothes, maybe cooked some food.

I was so different than all of my sisters. I always looked for bigger things, and my mother used to always fuss at me. She said, "Your high mind is going to get you in trouble someday."

THAT'S ANOTHER STORY, HOW I GOT HERE to Dooky's. Okay, you know I liked to go out. I was one who couldn't—I never could sit still, and I think that's what pains me about aging. I don't like staying still. I like moving. I like doing things. So I like to go out with different people. Just go out. And then I was out and about town, and then everybody would go—I never was a one-man person. I never had, like young girls have a boyfriend. No, I had plenty of friends, and we're going to go out. We're going to go out and look around and have a little drink here. And sometimes go out until four o'clock in the morning. And when you hit that clock at seven, I never missed a day's work and never was late for a day's work.

I used to come here after I'd get off of work and come to eat. But I didn't even know Dooky then. Dooky was a musician, so I met him when he was playing music. I was at a dance, and I was popular because I was good-looking and had a fairly good shape. I had everything going. So I'm in the hall dancing, and he said, "Take over this, man, I'm going to dance with this girl."

And so Dooky got off the band and we started dancing, and I still, "I ain't paying him no mind. I still got all these other boyfriends." And at that time, I didn't like musicians. I thought they were all weird and crazy. I liked people in sports. Boxing was the big thing with me.

So he kept on, so then we started going out. And that was it. I knew Dooky maybe

Chase in the kitchen of Dooky Chase's

Photos by Denny Culbert

four or five months when we were married. Dooky was only eighteen years old. I was twenty-three. I didn't feel like he was any younger. He had been with the band since he was sixteen years old.

He would come to work here because his daddy made him. His daddy more than his mother made him work. So he would come here, and he would work the bar at that time. He was good on the bar, too. Didn't drink a thing, but could make you the best drink you ever drank. He didn't smoke, didn't do anything. I think that's what caused him to leave the music world. He couldn't cope with that element.

The restaurant was across the street at first, but they didn't stay there long. They started there in '39, but by '41—my mother-in-law was a mover and shaker. She was a great money manager. And my father-in-law was always sick. He had ulcers. He quit going out selling the lottery because he couldn't do it anymore. So she opened up that little shop and they sold the lottery out of the shop, as well as sandwiches. Then she moved—she bought this over here, and she lived in this side here and the restaurant was next door.

When I came in here, I thought I was going to be a waitress. Where I came from, I was a waitress, and a good one. And I was coming up with ideas, and they didn't know where I was coming from. Like even the shrimp cocktail. Black people did not know what a shrimp cocktail was when I came here in 1946. Where were they going to eat it? They didn't have no place else to eat it.

The people used to tell my mother-in-law, "Oh, she's going to ruin your business. You see that girl? She's going to ruin it." But my mother-in-law was making money in here in '45. Everybody was making money by '45. Things were booming and people had jobs then. And my mother-in-law was making money. She loved money, and she always had her roll in her bosom like everybody did. My mother-in-law walked around with about $500 in her bosom.

And she would sit down there, I remember, with a cigar box. And in those days, people were working—if they worked on the river, or they worked anywhere, they came to cash their check. And she had her money—$6,000, $7,000—in her cigar box. And she'd cash those checks sitting right out there on the table with the cigar box.

I'LL NEVER FORGET THIS BOO-BOO I MADE: I said, "Now, nothing is different. The only difference in people is the color of their skin." Now, that was stupid. There are different cultures. So here, I'm going to put—the first thing I put on the menu to change: lobster Thermidor.

The people said, "Is she crazy? Emily, she is going to ruin your business, everything you worked for." But my mother-in-law, she supported me 100 percent.

It didn't go over because black people were not introduced to cream sauces at that time. Where would they have cream sauces unless they worked in a restaurant? They would have stews, they would have plenty of meat, they would have stuffing, oyster dressing, they would have mirlitons. They would have things like that, but they would never have lobster Thermidor. They would never have shrimp Newburg. They never had a shrimp cocktail.

So okay, that didn't work. So I backed up. When I came here, my mother-in-law had a piece of paper like this, and this was her menu: fried chicken, fried fish. We used to get those little trout,

ABOVE AND BELOW: Chase is a prolific collector of African American art. Pieces from her collection hang in the dining room.

three-quarters or a pound, and split them open, and you'd fry it whole and you would serve it whole like that. Just split and fry it whole with the head on and all.

Where I was leading, I got folks to follow me by backing up. So then when I made a real menu that people could understand rather than what my mother-in-law was writing, I start making lunch once a day—meatballs and spaghetti or something. I said, "We got to have dinner," and I made a dinner menu, and I'd give them what they had: grillades, jambalaya, gumbo, veal panée, stuffed chicken breast with oyster dressing. See, they knew that. That was something they could relate to. So I had to back up and do that.

I had to introduce them to even setting a table up here. When you came in, you found this restaurant just like it is now—this room, and you had plastic tablecloths on the table. You had ketchup bottles. You had hot sauce bottles on the table. And you had your waitress that sat in that corner. When you came in, she gave you this piece of paper and took the order. She gave you a fork and a knife and a paper napkin as you came in.

Now that's another thing they said: "Nobody is going to eat with this silver on this table." Black people were strange about restaurants because, you see, in their minds, they had been brainwashed that restaurants were not clean. That's how they kept us safe from segregation. "You don't want to eat there." They didn't tell you you couldn't eat there because you were black. "You don't want to eat there because they're not clean. All of those people drink out of the same glass."

As late as '46. And so I said, "I am setting up this table." And then I said, "Oh no, we can't use this paper. I can't have this paper in here. We have to use cloth." That's what I saw on the other side of the town. Well, they thought I was crazy.

My mother-in-law and father-in-law were popular, so the people would come out, but it was like a Saturday-night space. Black folks ate dinner at home. They didn't eat out. They came out to drink. If you were three people and you drank maybe bourbon, you'd say, "Give me a setup." You know what a setup was? A half a pint of bourbon, whatever bourbon you ordered, and black folks didn't order cheap bourbon. They liked good stuff. They had to drink I.W. Harper or Old Forester 100. And you would get the bucket of ice, the little pan of ice, and your glass, and maybe a Coke and a 7-Up and your half-pint. Now, if you wanted your setup dressed, you'd say, "Give me my ice dressed." So that means on top of that ice I'd put lemon and cherries. I'd dress the ice so when you made your drink at the table, you put your lemon and your cherry in your drink.

> "Your high mind ***is going to get you in trouble some day.***"

Creoles ate at home. They did everything at home. So the Creoles could understand this place. This was somebody they knew, somebody they could relate to, and if Emily was cooking for them—like frying her fish or frying her oysters—they trusted in Emily.

I started in the kitchen when I came here. I didn't know anything, so I started doing just whatever they did in the kitchen. And then I decided, "Well wait, we got to change." You know people had—men began to have office jobs like lawyers, like Dutch [Morial]. And they began to have professional jobs. So that's when I changed, and we had to start getting lunches at first, making lunches. And then we started to put the dinner menu on, because people were beginning to eat out. Black people. But for some uncanny reason from time to time, we always had white people.

Even in the '60s, I was told so many times, "You can't. You can't do this. Oh, you can't do that." And don't ever do that, because I'm ninety-one, almost ninety-two, now. Don't tell me I can't, because I'm going to go out there and show you I can. "No white people are going to come in here, Leah. You can't do that." They thought it was impossible. They thought no white person would appreciate anything that we had.

It's good food, but nobody thought that. Okay, I'd get in here and I'd do what I have to do in here, and then I'd work the total community. That was unbelievable. See, for one thing, blacks would not even think about giving something to a white organization. They wouldn't think about that. Like if I did something for the museum, "Oh Leah, that's white people." No, they didn't understand that. Giving to white things, they didn't understand that. So I did those things, so thereby I'm bringing the people in.

I LIKE WHAT I DO. I LOVE WHAT I DO. And when people come to visit me, that's like getting your gas tank filled. You have energy to keep going. If I sat down in my house all the time, I would cry all day long. I would cry and I would pray all day long. I'm just frightened of death and I don't want to think about it. I want to move and keep going and just keep moving. I'm not frightened of not being able to do, because I figure if I pray hard enough, I don't think God would take me this far and then drop me like a hot potato. I don't believe he'll do that to me.

Work is like medicine to me. It just makes me go and it just makes me want to do things, and when I see people come, that makes me want—I get creative again and my mind keeps saying, "You can do this. You can do that." Dooky says, "You're always thinking about food." Yeah, I always think about food.

Leah Chase served as the first president of the SFA board of directors.

ATLANTA'S MASA MAVEN

Tía Gladys brings Ojo de Agua flavor to Atlanta

BY JENNIFER ZYMAN

GLADYS MARTINEZ HAD TO catch her breath. It was 2014, and chef Kevin Maxey, of Ford Fry's Atlanta restaurants Superica and The El Felix, was on the phone. Maxey wanted to use her Tía Gladys brand of masa on his menus. Maxey came upon Martinez's product while at Carnicería Y Tienda La Confianza on Buford Highway. He only needed a taste to know its value. On the call with Maxey, Martinez was elated. Tía Gladys was already a favorite in more than seventy markets throughout the Atlanta area, but this would be her introduction to the city's intown dining scene. The crowds at Superica and El Felix (two locations each) were undeniable—Maxey was going to need a lot of masa. She had worked years to achieve such visibility, but this? This felt like a dream. "Oh, my God," she thought. "Is this real?"

LEFT TO RIGHT: Gladys Martinez; Cooking tortillas on the comal
OPPOSITE PAGE: Grinding in progress

Photos by Erik Meadows

Martinez's family had deep roots in the masa business, dating back to 1948, when her great-grandfather started grinding masa for a fee. At that time, in Ojo de Agua, San Luis Potosí, central Mexico, he lacked access to electrical power, so he relied on a gas-fueled motor. Great-granddad taught his son, who taught his daughters, Martinez's mother and aunt. They continued the tradition. Born in 1976 in Pharr, Texas, she grew up with great respect for corn and the savvy that made it possible to sustain a business. It wasn't long before she became a masa expert. Unlike her elders, Martinez had to be convinced to make masa her career.

By 2011, Martinez had moved to Atlanta. She cleaned properties for a fire restoration company and sold nutritional supplements for Herbalife. Between shifts, she ground corn and made masa for her family and friends. Word got around that her masa was exceptional—a holy grail for the Mexican home cook. Everyone wanted more.

Eventually, a neighbor offered to pay Martinez for her masa. Friendly hookups weren't going to do it anymore—people wanted to count on her ground corn like any other grocery item. Martinez realized this was a chance to launch a business that would include her parents and sister. "I always sold other people's products," Martinez said. "Why not make my own product to sell?" She called her mother. They decided to bring a *molino de nixtamal*, a corn grinder, from Mexico. Corn, she knew. A pathway to a manufacturing and distribution business was less clear. Martinez turned to YouTube and studied how-to videos posted by entrepreneurs. "That was my school. I started to learn how do it and then said, 'Ok, Mami. We can start with the stores.'"

The label on the package read Tía Gladys. Her production facility was a mobile home—only temporary, she told herself. Her first client was Supermercado La Villa in Acworth. Martinez followed a meticulous process. She began with high-quality corn kernels, which she soaked in lime water. To remove the husks pre-grind, she drained, cooked, and massaged the kernels. Finally, she ground the corn, either by hand or machine depending on the end use—coarse for tamales and fine for tortillas. People loved the flavor.

Following her call with Maxey, Martinez pushed to scale up production to meet new demand. Like many product-based small businesses, she struggled to keep pace with deliveries. David Trancoso of La Cosecha Food Service, which also owns the restaurant chain La Parilla, stepped in. He offered to help Martinez deliver her masa to Maxey's restaurants, while she continued to handle the stores.

In May 2014, when Trancoso arrived to pick up the masa, he noticed that Martinez was visibly upset. She had outgrown the mobile home business. Her temporary facility in Calhoun was too far from her house—seventy-five minutes one-way. She had found a former tortilleria space, but was $60,000 short of the $90,000 price tag. Martinez was considering a loan to bridge the gap. Trancoso offered a partnership instead, where he would facilitate deliveries and invest in the business. Martinez agreed.

THE TÍA GLADYS headquarters sits in a Woodstock strip mall. Inside, the walls are bright orange and lined with an ATM-sized, metal grinder and a refrigerator with glass

double doors. A conveyor belt cuts through the center of the room. Martinez and her team, which includes her sister, her daughter, and a friend, don plastic aprons, hairnets, and gloves. Martinez shovels scoops of soaked corn into a device the size of a washing machine. The machine spits out mounds of wet, coarse cornmeal. Martinez's team transfers the masa to cookie sheets. When the dough dries, they will bag it and refrigerate it prior to delivery.

Pulling from a bowl of dough, Martinez and her colleagues use a press to form tortillas seven to eight inches. They cook the tortillas on a *comal* the size of a hula-hoop. Martinez bounces the hot, thin rounds between her hands to cool before filling them with chorizo and tomatillo salsa, spooned from a worn Dutch oven. Martinez says it took her five years to get to this point—to acquire a loyal customer base, to expand her distribution, to pay for the machines. She provides Superica and El Felix with three hundred pounds of masa every week. With that masa, Maxey and his crew make tamales, puffy tacos, and shrimp tacos dorados. In the corner stands a new tortilla line Trancoso brought from Mexico. Martinez will use it to fulfill Maxey's orders. She hopes that other restaurant deals will follow.

Tía Gladys has gained wide recognition and Martinez enjoys it. The attention also makes her nervous. She gets recognized at restaurants as "the masa woman," but being a local celebrity is awkward for this soft-spoken woman. A need for acknowledgment didn't drive Martinez to build Tía Gladys. She wanted to create a family business and connect people who left Mexico with a taste of home. "They wish to eat masa again," she says. "The tortillas that the family makes for them...that their mother, or the grandmother makes. It's my vision to help the people eat that again so they can remember the tortillas from when they were children." Sometimes, the life Martinez built with Tía Gladys still feels like a dream. Thanks to her, a generation of Southerners are creating masa-filled memories that feel real.

> *'I always sold other people's products,' Martinez said.*
> **'WHY NOT MAKE MY OWN PRODUCT TO SELL?'**

Jennifer Zyman writes about dining for Atlanta *magazine.*

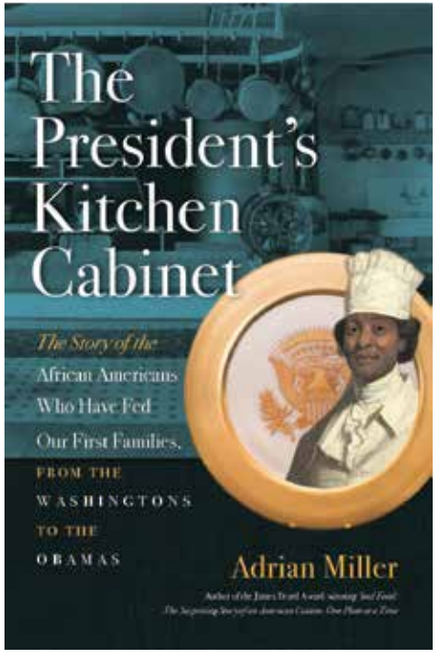
The team at Tía Gladys includes several members of Martinez's family.

Martinez sends more than 300 pounds of masa per week to Superica and The El Felix.

BACK OF THE WHITE HOUSE

Researching the history of US presidents' kitchens

AS TOLD TO *GRAVY*
BY ADRIAN MILLER



Courtesy of Adrian Miller

RECENTLY, UNC PRESS PUBlished Adrian Miller's *The President's Kitchen Cabinet: The Story of the African Americans Who Have Fed Our First Families, from the Washingtons to the Obamas*. An SFA member and the James Beard Award–winning author of *Soul Food,* Miller aimed to fill in the "historical silhouettes" of the black culinary figures whose influence he noted while researching his first book. For Miller, this book is about righting the record. While the circumstances, names, and personal contributions of these men and women often passed without attention, Miller argues that these African Americans were culinary artists whose recognition is long overdue. "Many were also family confidants," he told *Gravy*. "In some cases, they were civil rights advocates. Some were all three."

How did you compile research for this project?
This started when I was doing the *Soul Food* book research. I found stray references about African Americans who cooked for our presidents in newspaper articles. Then I gathered all of the cookbooks that were either written by White House cooks or by third parties as a summary of White House cooking, because I wanted to see references made to African Americans. Then I looked at presidential memoirs and biographies to see who was mentioned. They just jumped off the page.

I visited eight presidential libraries. It's hit or miss in terms of what the libraries have on food. If the archival team and the White House photographer weren't interested in the food or the kitchen, then there's very little. But you had some that were interested and detailed. At the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, if you pick a day when Carter was in the White House, you can pretty much get the menu of what he ate in the residence. Most of the time, we only get menus for the state dinners. But they didn't start printing or saving them until the Eisenhower administration.

The last part was personal interviews with presidential cooks who were willing to talk to me. I reached out to several. I tracked down ten former White House chefs: four African American, six white. Of the four African Americans, none would talk to me. And of the white chefs, five out of the six, not only did they talk to me, they're telling me stuff that I shouldn't even hear. That is interesting because they all signed the same paperwork. The white chefs felt more liberated to talk than the black chefs. I think understandably the black chefs were like, "There's probably more professional repercussions for us if we're seen as talking out of school."

Going into the ninteenth century, many kitchen staffers weren't referred to by name, or by their full name. How did this impact your ability to identify people?
Once I got a stray reference about a cook, I became obsessed with trying to find out as much as I could. The primary resource here was historic newspapers. The Library of Congress and several private companies have digitized old newspapers, and they're word-searchable. But if I couldn't find anything through newspapers or through Google Books, I figured it was just going to be a needle in a haystack.

For each chapter, I created categories of presidential cooks, then tried to find three to four people whom I could find enough detail about to anchor that chapter. There's a lot of information about cooks in the founding fathers age up to Jefferson. Washington and Jefferson compiled a ton of information about their cooks and then it's pretty bone dry. But I knew that once I got past the 1890s, there'd be more. From the 1890s to the 1980s, there's a lot of information.

By categories of presidential cooks, you mean all staffers who were involved with food preparation.
Yes. I didn't just deal with cooks in the basement kitchen. I tried to take a look at the constellation of cooks who supported and fed our First Families. That helped with the research gaps, because then I could include people that cooked on trains, yachts, and other places.

Do you see a correlation between the influence of a president and what we know about their household foodways?
There definitely is something about celebrity status. People were more curious about what was going in their household and there are more references to it. But the interesting thing is, there's not a lot of information about the food they ate while they were president. I thought that all these people who had dinner with them, everybody would write about it in their diaries. I didn't see much, and I was a surprised by that.

Is this related to our increased interest in food reporting over the years?
I think that our presidents were self-conscious about not giving fodder to their political enemies to criticize them. Food was one of the tools that people used. Washington was self-conscious about appearing like a monarch.

You're saying politicians were concerned with how their food tastes could be used against them.
Right. The poster child for all of this is Martin Van Buren. His political enemies painted him as an out-of-touch elitist by talking about how he ate with golden utensils. That narrative stuck, and he actually lost reelection.

That barb has persisted—the out-of-touch elitist—arugula, and what not.
Exactly right. Food is often a leading indicator of having an elitist attitude. One more thing that was annoying for me, just to show you how differently we view food now compared to the past: Even with the state dinners, which are these grand entertainments, I'd find elaborate, intricate descriptions of the table settings, the flowers, everything. Then they'd say, "And there was a grand meal held."

FDR LOVED DAISY BONNER'S PIGS' FEET.

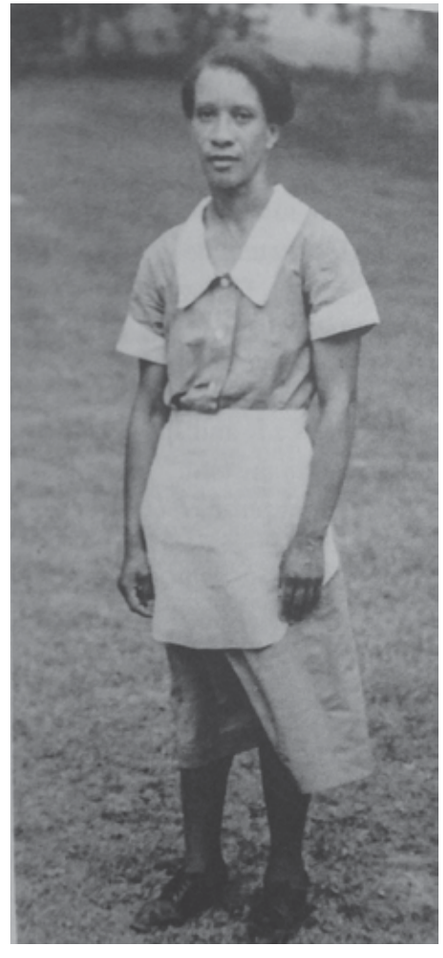
And she made a pecan cake that he really liked.

What terms did you search under?
I'd look for "White House" or "president's house"—they didn't start calling it the White House until later in the 1800s. Also "meal," "dinner," "state dinner," "grand entertainment," and "bill of fare"—people didn't really say menu. Those terms generated a lot of menu and dinner descriptions. For the cooks, I'd search "White House," "colored cook" or "Negro cook," and sometimes I'd do "nigger cook" just to see if it came up. Even in *The New York Times* they would use that term, but it didn't show up as much. It was mostly Negro or colored cook, and Negro or colored caterer. I didn't find "Negro chef" or "colored chef." It was "cook."

Let's talk about a few specific figures. Laura "Dollie" Johnson cooks for Benjamin Harrison and Grover Cleveland in the late 1880s and early 1890s. Then she capitalizes on her time in the White House and opens a restaurant in Lexington, Kentucky, afterward. What impressed you about her?
She's one of the most fascinating people I've come across in my research. She is somebody who has to be persuaded to work at the White House. Before her time, most African American White House cooks were either enslaved or already a longtime cook for somebody who happened to become president. Here's this woman who wants to start a business, and presidential staff is pleading with her to come cook for them. It shows me the leverage and bargaining power she had. She cooked for Harrison but only stayed for several months because her daughter got sick, so she returned to Lexington. But when Cleveland gets elected, he begs her to come work for him.

I've been trying to figure out why she was so distinctive. There were others who were similarly situated who did not get the national headlines that she got. Maybe it was because Theodore Roosevelt was a booster of hers, and he recommends Dollie Johnson to Harrison.

Let's talk about Daisy Bonner, who cooked for Franklin Delano Roosevelt at his estate in Warm Springs, Georgia.
I found several different strands of the story about Daisy Bonner. I get alerted to her through newspaper clippings. I went to Warm Springs and listened to the park ranger's stories. In the book *Hi-Ya Neighbor*, which is about FDR's time in Warm Springs, Bonner is all over that book. That's what really catapulted her story for me. There are pictures of her; it talks about several of the dishes she cooked for FDR, and how they interacted.



Daisy Bonner cooked for FDR at his Warm Springs, Georgia, estate.

Courtesy of FDR Presidential Library

The thing that hit me hard was going through Warm Springs on the tour. I was in the kitchen where she cooked and heard the story of how at FDR's passing, she wrote on the wall that she cooked the first and last meal for the president. I went into the cottage that she lived in on the grounds. Unlike other people I write about in the book, I was able to have a physical attachment to Daisy. I could go to the workspace where she worked and the place she stayed when she cooked there. For a lot of these other people, where they worked, where they stayed, all of that has been demolished.

Describe country captain, a local specialty she cooks for FDR.
It's a chicken curry dish. The story, likely apocryphal, is that a ship from the West Indies was carrying spices and was forced to dock in Savannah due to a storm. A local cook uses the spices to create this curry dish. It's a Georgia thing: chicken with a curry sauce, and you add condiments like toasted coconut, peanuts, raisins, or currants.

Bonner gets FDR hooked on pigs' feet.
FDR loved her pigs' feet. When she made pigs' feet for him, she would broil them and butter them. And she made a pecan cake that he really liked. Then of course there's the cheese soufflé, which supposedly stood for two hours after he died. I don't know how that happened, because I made that recipe and the thing falls immediately.

Zephyr Wright is a key figure. She travels with Lyndon Johnson and his family, but stops because of the indignities she faces due to segregation. Their relationship influences his lobbying Congress to support the Civil Rights Act. What about her story was new for you?

When you read interviews with her, she seems to be, as she recounts it, nonplussed about the civil rights movement. She wasn't really a firebrand. LBJ would often ask her, "What do black people think about what I'm doing? Do they appreciate what I'm doing?" And she would give these answers that would infuriate him. She'd say, "I guess," or "I don't know." I'm not sure if she's messing with him or what. These exchanges were surprising to me. Because what I'd fancied were these deep moments where she's counseling him, where she's the inspirational force for him to act. But it seems like it was more by her example rather than her actively pressing him.

I do love the story of LBJ using Zephyr Wright's Jim Crow experiences. Not only did he do this with members of Congress, he started doing this with the elites in Georgetown. He knew that it was an inside/outside game. If he could use her story to change the hearts and minds of the academics and the wealthy people in Georgetown, that could help him get leverage and influence members of Congress.

Wright and Johnson had a unique rapport, it seems.
You hear stories about LBJ; he was not a shrinking violet. But Zephyr Wright gave it right back. He'd show up at 9 p.m. at night demanding dinner and she'd yell, "You just go sit in the kitchen and wait." And he'd do it!

Is that indicative of real power Wright held, or is that akin to the mammy role—in that during this period white people with black, domestic employees tolerated a certain amount of attitude from black women? How do we read an exchange like that?

Adrian Miller

Bernard Grant

I think it's a mix—it's certainly part of the latter. But she was one of the few people who could talk back to him. A story that LBJ loved was that at the height of the Vietnam War, one of his strongest critics was Senator William Fulbright. Fulbright said in the press that LBJ had an arrogance of power. LBJ cornered him at a cocktail reception and pulled a handwritten note out of his pocket from Zephyr Wright. I'm paraphrasing, but it said, "Mr. President, you don't seem to want to take care of yourself. I'm gonna be your boss. So from now on you're going to eat whatever I put in front of you, and you're not going to complain." LBJ would say, "If I get a talking-to from my cook, how can I be an arrogant person?"

The kitchen staffers in your book experience personal stress and hardships during their time serving presidents. Wright gains eighty pounds during her tenure. Washington's enslaved chef, Hercules, has his freedom dangled in front of him and finally runs away. Did you feel like you pulled back the curtain on how difficult these roles were?
The relationship between the president and the cook varies. Washington has a complicated relationship with Hercules. Washington shuffles him back and forth between Pennsylvania and Mount Vernon to avoid Pennsylvania law that would allow Hercules to be free after six months in residency.

Washington would let him walk about town after he finished his cooking duties. Hercules could go to the opera. He even let Hercules sell leftovers out of the kitchen. And this brother's cooking was *good*—he was making $5,000 a year (in current dollars) selling leftovers. But at the end of his presidency, Washington is suspicious that Hercules is going to try to escape. Rather than send him to the kitchen at Mount Vernon, he sends Hercules into the fields to do hard labor. That was too jarring for Hercules. After Hercules ran away, Washington spent a lot of time and spared no expense trying to get Hercules back.

But the poignant example to me is two enslaved women, Edith Hern Fossett and Frances Gillette Hern, who cooked for Jefferson. They were assistant cooks. These women lived most of their lives in the White House basement; their slave quarters were right off the main kitchen. They gave birth to kids in the White House basement, and some of their kids died there.

You'll have to explain that.
Anyone who's been in DC in July or August can understand this because DC is essentially a reclaimed swap—the White House was a seasonal residence. People would leave in late May or early June and return in the fall when the weather cooled. But Jefferson made these women stay and cook for the skeleton staff that remained, so Fossett and Hern never got to go back home to Monticello. Working in a hot kitchen during the sweltering summers in DC was no joy either. Believe it or not, in the nineteenth century, summer White House employees would sometimes get stricken with tropical diseases like malaria! There are stories of these women's husbands escaping Monticello just to visit their wives. But Jefferson would have the men caught before they got to DC and send them back.

In terms of the modern inconveniences, traditionally White House kitchen staff has earned low pay compared to what somebody could command in the private sector. And even then, the black cooks were always paid less than the white cooks. I'd also see complaints about the long hours. The thing that bothered the cooks the most were presidents who were consistently late, and presidents who show up with guests at the last minute.

The other part is the diminished status. Ever since Jacqueline Kennedy made a change in leadership, African Americans have been assistant chefs. I don't mean to demean that position, but 1968 is the last time you have an African American running the White House kitchen.

What did Jacqueline Kennedy do differently?
First, let's go back to the 1800s. The cooks were primarily African American women. But during the Theodore Roosevelt administration, there was a sharp break from African American cooks having the dominant position. There was a Swedish cook vibe from 1904–1920. I don't know

Dollie Johnson cooked for President Benjamin Harrison in the early 1890s.

Library of Congress

what that's about. Swedish and Irish women were running the White House kitchen. Then you get to FDR, and there was a run of black cooks for quite a while. Truman and Eisenhower have white chefs, and Eisenhower had a Filipino chef as well, Pedro Udo.

A Filipino chef!
His son is still alive; I'm trying to get in touch with him so I can interview him. But Jacqueline Kennedy was not feeling Udo because he was a military cook. She changed the standard to European food from European-trained chefs. That started a thirty-year run of European chefs running the White House kitchen. It was interrupted briefly because LBJ and the French cook that Kennedy hired didn't get along, so he quit. LBJ brought his family cook, Zephyr Wright.

You write about the peculiar balance of the special connections these cooks had with the presidents they served, and the subjugated role these men and women often experienced in society.
Even though these presidents weren't interested in improving the status of black people overall, I found these wonderful expressions of genuine sentiment between the presidents and their staff—celebrating family births, giving anniversary gifts. Some of these African American professionals named their kids after presidents they worked for. Presidents attended the funerals and were moved by the deaths of these cooks. You hear about deathbed farewells. It doesn't square with the dynamics of the time.

Did your aim in writing this book change in the process?
When I started, it was about my curiosity. Then I became fueled by a fierce determination to make sure these people got adequate due. I want to correct the record and possibly be a springboard for deeper scholarship about this aspect of the presidency. I'm not going to lie: At times I was angry. I'd read the sources and I'd figure out the role that an African American played in a situation, and it's stunning to me that they're not even mentioned.

It underscores the arguments about culinary justice and attribution.
I was definitely thinking about that. This is one of the most stunning examples of the need for balance, to bring to light what these folks actually did. I think these African American cooks gave our presidents a window on black life. A lot of presidents chose not to open that window, but because of the ones who did, I think our country is better for it.

Adrian Miller is also the author of Soul Food: The Surprising Story of an American Cuisine, One Plate at a Time.

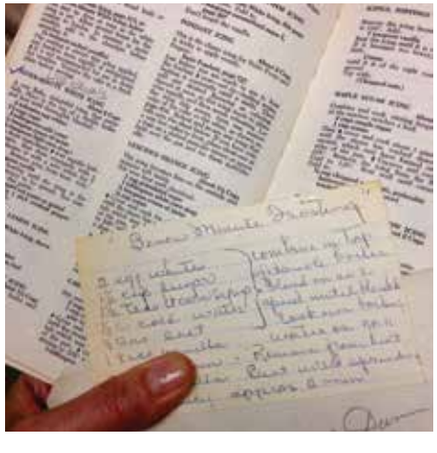
Photos by Jennifer Justus

DIRTY PAGES

My ex's favorite icing

AS TOLD TO
JENNIFER JUSTUS
BY MINDY MERRELL

Dirty pages are the messiest recipes in our collections. Dusted with cocoa powder and ringed with coffee stains, handed down from family or shared by friends, they offer good instructions and deliver the best stories. Dirty Pages, *the ongoing recipe exhibit, launched in Nashville in 2015, a collaboration with Erin Byers Murray and Cindy Wall. The series peeks into the homes of cooks across the South. In this installment for* Gravy, *we hear from food writer Mindy Merrell, who still makes her ex-husband's grandmother's frosting. She stores the recipe between the pages of her grandmother's 1964 paperback edition of* Joy of Cooking. –Jennifer Justus



THIS JULY, ON MY FORMER husband's birthday, I'll once again make his favorite angel food cake with fluffy white icing. It's the classic cake his maternal grandmother, Nana, made every year when he was a child. I've been making it for him for about thirty years. The last fifteen or so we haven't even been married.

Cary Dunn, a native of Newport News, Virginia, is a reserved guy who doesn't gush about his childhood, but he gushes about this cake. He'll tell you how the billowy icing develops a thin, crispy crust in dry air and how it shatters to reveal soft insides. He knows every stage of icing according to that particular birthday's humidity. Don't make a lemon curd filling with the leftover egg yolks or garnish the cake with fresh raspberries. Cary wants his cake minimalist, pure, and white. Doesn't that sound just like an architect?

My early icing attempts weren't always successful. Cary was nice about those grainy years. Not long before she died, Nana handed me an index card with the handwritten recipe. I learned that I needed to make the icing over a hot water bath to keep the sugar syrup from crystalizing. For this recipe, I trade my stand mixer for a little handheld number. Nailing this icing still makes me do a victory dance in the kitchen. It's a food science marvel.

I like making what we call "the cake." The whole family eats it, but Cary owns it. His continued friendship is a good excuse to keep baking it, and more than that, it's a way to share our kids' Virginia roots with them. Maybe when they're older they will make the cake, too.

Mindy's take on NANA'S SEVEN-MINUTE WHITE ICING

- 2 egg whites
- 1 ½ cups sugar
- ⅓ cup water
- Small squirt of corn syrup (about 1 ½ teaspoons)
- ¼ teaspoon cream of tartar
- Pinch of salt
- 1 teaspoon vanilla

Combine all ingredients, except the vanilla, in the top of a double boiler or in a stainless steel mixing bowl set over a saucepan of boiling water. Beat with an electric hand mixer for 7 minutes.

Remove the icing from the heat and add the vanilla.

Continue beating until the icing cools slightly, has a thick spreading consistency, and can hold onto the cake, about 2-3 minutes longer.

Spread a thin layer all over the cake to set the crumbs. Add a second thick layer.

GRAVY

Gravy is a publication of the Southern Foodways Alliance, a member-supported institute of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi.

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