

Baker, restaurateur, and cookbook author Erika Council

LIFTING AS SHE RISES

Erika Council furthers a legacy with her first cookbook.

BY ROSALIND BENTLEY



Photos by Andrew Thomas Lee

SOME PEOPLE HAVE THE TOUCH FOR MAKING THE MOST FLUFFY, CRUMBLY, RICH biscuits worthy of a lazy Sunday morning. Then there are others of us who can't make one worth a dime, despite fervent prayer. Erika Council, owner and chef of Bomb Biscuit Co. in Atlanta's Old Fourth Ward, obviously sits on a pew of the former. Watching her work the line in her kitchen alongside her team as they assemble SECs—sausage, egg, and cheese biscuits—hot honey fried chicken biscuits, and so many others, is confirmation that Council, a former STEM kid, is doing what she is called to do. The granddaughter of the legendary Chapel Hill restaurateur Mildred Council, known as Mama Dip, Erika Council has claimed her own space in the landscape with both her restaurant and her first book, *Still We Rise: A Love Letter to the Southern Biscuit*. Published this summer by Clarkson Potter, the book contains more than seventy recipes: chocolate chip, sweet potato benne seed biscuits, cola biscuits, and plenty of step-by-step instructions. Woven through its pages are stories of the Black women and men who cleared a path for Council, nurtured her, and who inspire her each time she adds flour to a mixing bowl and begins to make dough. For those of us who still aren't confident in our skills, Council advises maybe skip the duck-fat biscuits and start with her butter swim biscuits: "You mix everything in a pot or in a baking dish. Easy."

(This interview has been edited for length and clarity.)

Rosalind Bentley: *Tell me about your old day job, because I only ever knew you as biscuits. Then in a conversation, you slipped and said, "Well, girl, you know I'm a software engineer."*

Erika Council: My mom was a software developer for IBM in the eighties. One of the OG women. She worked in Research Triangle Park [North Carolina]. She had a huge laptop and like all the old mainframe and C++ and Python books stacked up in the corner. My mom could do this with hands tied behind her back; free-form [coding]. I was inspired. And I was in the INROADS program—they recruited African American kids to be more involved in technology. So, it was just

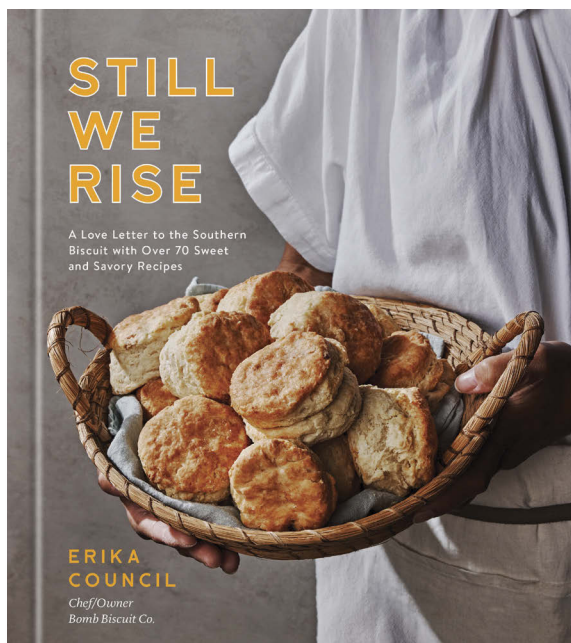
something that interested me early on, from the old-school Oregon Trail [computer game], mapping your way on that floppy disk.

I worked as a Salesforce developer from probably 2009 until I founded Bomb Biscuits in 2021. I was still doing freelance work at night...I would get up like 6 A.M., make biscuits, work all day, and then come home and from like, seven o'clock to one, two in the morning, work on help desk tickets.... Go to bed, get up, and do it all over again.

RB: *Talk about making a way.*

EC: I had to convince myself, before I stepped out on faith, that I could actually make this work. I'm still not convinced.

I'm not gonna lie: It's tough. But what does motivate me is when I have so many people coming in, like, "Oh, I saw your story, an African American restaurant in the Old Fourth Ward." I get those people coming into the restaurant and just telling me how proud of me they are. We're starting to get some kids in who want to learn how to make biscuits—African American kids. Teaching science through baking biscuits. I've done one or two things individually with some young girls whose parents were regulars and asked me, "Our daughter, she has all these cookbooks that are written by white authors, I would love for you to kind of explain it." So we made sourdough bread because I asked [her], "What do you want to know how to make?" And she says, "Well, do you know how to make sourdough bread? Because when I see that, that's not something African Americans make." And I made it, and I talked about my great-aunt Fanny,





One of Council's biscuits with country ham

who lived to be 103. She used to keep little jars [of starter] around her house and she would open them up and smell and determine which one she would use. It would be molasses in one, potatoes in the other. I mean, she used a lot of things to create sourdough. So, for me, it's just calling out these names of people that they don't see in cookbooks.

RB: When you were making biscuits before you left Salesforce, was baking a release for you?

EC: Yes, it was a way for me to sort of clear my mind. I make a lot of different breads, but I just become known for the biscuits. It's just therapeutic for me.

RB: You talk about your paternal grandmother, Mama Dip. Let's talk about your other granny.

EC: My granny Geraldine was the one who taught me how to make biscuits. I did not learn how to make biscuits from Mildred Council. My mom's

mom took time to show me how to roll and cut them out. She didn't actually say, "You need one cup of this and one cup of that." It was more, "You get some flour and put it in a bowl with some of this and that, use your hands, and roll them out. You'll be fine." But that's not teaching! [Laughs] When I look back at it, learning the art, watching, and mimicking was more so than, "This is step one. This is this is step two. This is step three."

RB: You have a plethora of biscuit recipes throughout the book: rosemary-orange cream, sweet potato, corn, yogurt, duck fat. Do you have a preference for one or for a particular technique?

EC: I love the [pull-apart] biscuits, where you bake them with the edges on. As a kid, I thought that was so amazing. We would get the edges and pull them off and dip them into gravy. That's kind of my favorite way to eat them, and you don't waste any scraps. 🍷

Rosalind Bentley is Gravy's deputy editor. Erika Council serves on SFA's advisory board.

Angel Biscuits

BY ERIKA COUNCIL

Angel biscuits use yeast in addition to baking powder to give them a little extra lift and fluff. They pop up tall, almost like those biscuits you buy in the can. We're going to leave behind those canned biscuits, though, because I was taught the only thing that should come out of a can is paint.

This recipe calls for letting the dough rest for about 30 minutes before folding and cutting out the biscuits. The rest gives the liquid more time to hydrate the flour and the yeast time to ferment, filling the dough with gas that will give these biscuits an airy texture. Angel biscuits make great dinner roll substitutes. I serve them more often during the holidays and at big family gatherings with just a slather of butter across the top.

YIELD: 15 to 18 biscuits

- 2 cups full-fat buttermilk, warmed to 110°F**
- 4½ teaspoons active dry yeast**
- 2 tablespoons sugar**
- 5 cups / 600 grams all-purpose flour, plus extra for folding and cutting**
- 2 teaspoons baking powder**
- 1½ teaspoons kosher salt**
- 1 teaspoon baking soda**
- ½ cup (96 grams) vegetable shortening, cold, broken into pea-sized pieces**
- 1 stick (8 tablespoons) unsalted butter, cold**

1. Adjust the oven rack to the middle position and preheat the oven to 450°F.
2. Place the buttermilk, yeast, and sugar into a small bowl and stir gently to combine. Set aside until bubbles form on the surface of the mixture, 3 to 4 minutes.
3. Place the flour, baking powder, salt, and

baking soda in a large bowl and whisk to combine. Scatter the pieces of shortening over the flour mixture.

4. Using the slicing side of a box grater, slice the butter into the flour mixture. Toss the sheets of butter in the flour and then lightly work the butter pieces between your fingers or use a pastry cutter to break them up and coat them with flour. Stop when the dough resembles coarse sand and there are still some small visible pieces of butter.

5. Make a well in the center of the mixture. Add the buttermilk mixture and stir gently with a spatula until the dough forms into a ball and no dry bits of flour are visible. The dough will be shaggy and sticky.

6. Cover with plastic wrap and set aside to rest in a warm, dry place for 30 minutes.

7. Turn the dough onto a lightly floured surface and lightly dust with flour. This dough is easier to shape using a rolling pin. With floured hands, pat the dough into a ½-inch-thick 11 x 6-inch rectangle. Fold the ends of the rectangle toward the center, one end on top of the other, to create a trifold. Dust the top lightly with flour, press out to the same size rectangle again, and repeat the folding. Repeat this process a third time. After the third folding, pat the dough into a ½ inch thickness and cut out the biscuits using a floured 2-inch biscuit cutter. Be careful to press straight down and do not twist the cutter.

8. Place the biscuit rounds 1 inch apart on a parchment-lined baking sheet. Gather the scraps, reshape them, and pat the dough out to a ½ inch thickness. Cut out as above. Discard any remaining scraps.

9. Bake 15 to 20 minutes, rotating the pan once halfway through, until the tops are golden brown.

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