

Greasy

Oh when our joints refuse to function / When we stand in need of unktion /
Bring us two pork chops apiece / A skillet, lots of room, and grease.

– “Song to Grease” from *Soupsongs* by Roy Blount

NUMBER 23, WINTER 2007

NEWS FROM THE SOUTHERN FOODWAYS ALLIANCE

Saving Willie Mae’s Scotch House, One Weekend at a Time

by Mary Beth Lasseter

On Friday, November 17, 2006, I drove to New Orleans to work on the Scotch House. My assignment upon arrival: paint the front door. This may not sound remarkable to anyone else, but to someone who participated in the demolition that began back in January, it’s an exciting sign of progress.

When flooding in the wake of Hurricane Katrina destroyed the double-shotgun structure on the corner of St. Anne and Tonti streets in the Tremé area of New Orleans, it destroyed the home and restaurant that 90-year-old Willie Mae Seaton built as her life’s work. With her family scattered across the South, and no insurance money to rebuild, the Scotch House faced extinction. When SFA committed to save the Scotch House in early 2006, assessors believed that the job could be completed with five dedicated volunteer weekends.

Like so many other restoration projects in New Orleans, however, it wasn’t long into the work before we learned that most of the building’s damage predated Hurricane Katrina. Removal of sheetrock revealed lead paint and rotted timbers; termites had feasted for the past 50 years. The roof was no more than a single layer of shingles on top of older roof renditions, all rotted, and the cloth-covered wiring from a bygone era had to be replaced. Volunteers were numerous and enthusiastic, but construction expertise was slim and the budget slimmer. The job was much bigger than the professionals anticipated.

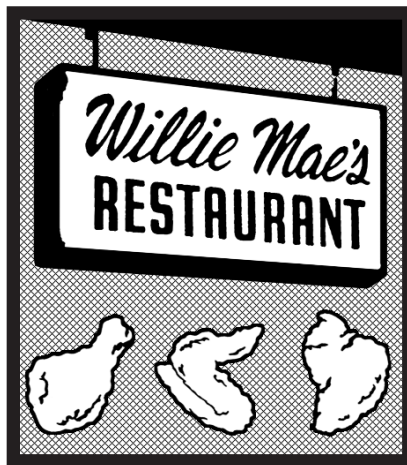
SFA members rallied when we issued the call to save the Scotch House. SFA founder John Egerton sold pickles all over the South to raise almost \$20,000. Members hosted parties and events to raise funds. Friends from South Carolina drove 13 hours in a rental van to deliver kitchen equipment. John

Currence, a native New Orleanian, volunteered to lead this project as foreman. Over one hundred SFA members and friends have traveled to New Orleans to scrape paint, jackhammer floors, and bleach away mold. Countless others have given to the Gulf Coast Renaissance Fund, where donations to date total over \$145,000.

Rebuilding the Scotch House has been an important project for the SFA. Some have questioned why this one restaurant merits so much attention when the whole city needs rebuilding. The answer is complex. Rebuilding has to start somewhere, and this project is at the heart of our mission. The work has been good for us and has reaffirmed the SFA’s identity as a family that recognizes the significance of sharing at table. Saving the Scotch House is a way to honor the small independent restaurant community that birthed New Orleans cuisine, and our neighborhood service is a faith statement that the residents of Tremé will rebuild.

Today, after almost a year of work and months of gutting and cleaning, we’ve begun to put things back together. The project is near completion. Ms. Seaton’s home will finish first, and she will live there while work is completed at her restaurant. By Mardi Gras Day, we hope that you’ll again be able to order a plate of fried chicken on the corner of St. Anne and Tonti.

Though work is reaching an end, the project’s final invoices still require funds. Tax-deductible donations to the Gulf Coast Renaissance Fund are encouraged. To donate, mail a check (payable to GCRF) to the SFA, P.O. Box 1848, The University of Mississippi, University, MS 38677. The University of Mississippi Foundation receipts all gifts.



Letter from the President

Grab your portable eating gear, and join us for an exciting year of SFA programs and projects. 2007 promises to be a great year. Among the things to anticipate: Willie Mae Seaton will be at home in New Orleans frying chicken again by Mardi Gras!

And keep in mind that you can join our New Orleans' oral history initiative by sharing a defining New Orleans food memory (call 888-841-6153) or by browsing our Web site to read samples of the poignant oral histories that Amy Evans has already collected, thanks to the generosity of the McIlhenny Company and the Fertel Foundation.

We're putting the final touches on this year's Taste of the South weekend, February 22-24 at Blackberry Farm in Tennessee. And plans are well under way for an exciting Day Camp to the Shoals area of Alabama April 20-21 as well as a Field Trip to Charleston, South Carolina, June 22-25. Come July, look for a Potlikker Film Festival in Houston. And this year marks the 10th anniversary of the fall Southern Foodways Symposium, October 25-28. Oh, and my fellow North Carolinians and I will host a SFA Day Camp on September 7-8 in and around Chapel Hill.

Stay tuned to *Gravy* for more information about these programs. Please contact me, if you'd like to learn more about the SFA or share a suggestion.

I look forward to seeing you soon.

Marcie Cohen Ferris
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➔ GRAVY ⇐

WINTER 2007, NO. 23

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Meet SFA Filmmaker Joe York

by Angie Mosier

If the Hollywood director Frank Capra had ever met SFA filmmaker Joe York, he might very well have made a film about him. Gary Cooper or Jimmy Stewart would have played York. And it would be set in a small, Southern town. The script would have tracked the life of the son of hard-working folks who seeks his way in the wide world. Think Mr. York Goes to Oxford.

Joe is a character. No doubt about that. He is sincere and zealous, funny and smart, talented and easy on the eyes. He also has a knack for directing attention to folks who would most likely never get it otherwise.

While studying anthropology at Auburn, digging up bones and artifacts from the Black Belt of Alabama to the Mayan ruins in Mexico, Joe became interested in the people, standing off to the side, watching students dig up their backyards. Not the dead but the living: the people that get overlooked until one day they are gone and all of a sudden we wish we had their story.

Joe ended up in Oxford, Mississippi (just the kind of romantic university town that Mr. Capra would have loved), obtained a master's degree in Southern Studies, and in the process bumped into the Southern Foodways Alliance. Falling for our mission of documentation and celebration, Joe found his place using his talent for visuals and story telling to shoot short films highlighting the SFA's Ruth Fertel Keepers of the Flame: "The great thing about documenting these people is that we pay attention to the ones who don't get highlighted but have made great contributions to our culture. Take Bill Best for example, the man we made *Saving Seeds* about. Who would have thought that a fellow who collects seeds and grows heirloom beans and tomatoes would get a standing ovation from a room full of people? Bill certainly never did."

When asked about his artistic style—his voice and view—Joe brushes it off as just the luck of the shoot or good natural light, but really, his angles and focus are subtle yet clear vistas into the work or the life of the subject. Joe shows us the way a pitmaster takes a slow drag on his cigarette while waiting on a pig to cook. Joe's camera pauses on the elbow of an oysterman tonging in the Apalachicola Bay, or a man wiping his brow as he eats hot fried chicken in Nashville.

Just like those Capra movie heroes, Joe brings attention to the people we take for granted. "The screen is not just for stars, pretty people with writers standing behind," says Joe. "Put an oysterman on the screen. His story deserves to be told just like everyone else's. Seeing them on screen reminds us that not only are they here, but they belong here." And while it would be great to see Mr. York's character on the screen itself, perhaps he is where he belongs for the moment—behind the camera, telling the stories that preserve our culture.

SFA CELEBRATES FIRST ANNUAL POTLIKKER FILM FESTIVAL IN ATLANTA

by Mary Beth Lasseter

SFA kicked off 2007 with the first annual Potlikker Film Festival in Atlanta on January 6. For the measly price of \$35, 300 ticket holders were treated to three documentaries by filmmaker Joe York and bottomless pints of Sweetwater Brewery's finest beers. Movie concessions included potlikker shots by Virginia Willis Culinary Productions; pig on a stick by Linton Hopkins of Restaurant Eugene; catfish popcorn by Anne Quatrano of Bacchanalia; sazerac tassies by Sonya Jones of Sweet Auburn Bread Company; and Dirty South Crackerjacks by Steven Satterfield of Watershed Restaurant. The Potlikker Film Festival (and its amazing concession stands) will soon hit the road. Look for a July stop in Houston.

Book Notes

Jefferson on Wine

By John R. Hailman. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006, \$38.00.



No nation is drunken where wine is cheap; and none sober, where the dearness of wine substitutes ardent spirits as the common beverage. —Thomas Jefferson

You can learn a lot about a man by his comforts, the things he insulates himself with as regards the world at large. For Thomas Jefferson this insulation, both literal and figurative, took the form of food and, moreover, drink; more specifically, fine wine.

Jefferson was a man of means. He could afford a little more insulation than most. In his introduction, author John Hailman relates an anecdote from Isaac Jefferson, a former slave and trusted Jefferson confidante, who says Jefferson never had less than eight covers, or dishes, at dinner, “even if nobody at table but himself.” If guests were present, this number could easily reach as high as 32, all with appropriate wines to accompany them.

Jefferson was more than just a gourmand of means. When flush, he increased his purchasing and cultivated his connoisseurship, became something of the Robert Parker of his age (albeit with more of a populist tilt; Jefferson delighted in bargains until his death). In the process, he helped shape America’s (and some of Europe’s) taste in wines.

Hailman, like Jefferson, has been known to split his time between the South and France (Oxford, Mississippi, and Merignac, for Hailman), is a wine judge, a former wine columnist for the *Washington Post*, and a one-time syndicated wine writer. His experience in newspaper journalism serves him well here; the book, more or less a collage of historical musings based on Jefferson’s own writings and the reminiscences of other contemporaries, takes the form of a lovingly annotated

timeline, allowing both the wine aficionado and the history devotee equally sublime pleasures.

Fine wine, the old nugget goes, only gets better with age. Who knew the same could be true of wine writing?

—Timothy C. Davis

Southern Cooking

By Mrs. R. S. Dull. Foreword by Damon Lee Fowler. Athens: University Press of Georgia, 2006, \$24.95.



The life of Mrs. Henrietta Stanley Dull (1863–1964) spanned the years from the Civil War to the Civil Rights Movement. Forced into employment by the failing health of her husband, Mrs. Dull for 25 years wrote an enormously popular and influential cooking column for the *Atlanta Journal*. She first collected her recipes into a cookbook in 1928 and enlarged the book for a new edition in 1941. That latter edition is reproduced in this reissue by the University Press of Georgia.

The result is an enormous collection of recipes—more than 1,300—that chronicle Southern culture and cookery, offering “a rare, critical link,” Damon Lee Fowler points out in his introduction, “in the transition from the nineteenth century to the modern world.”

Mrs. Dull’s writing style is forthright and authoritative. “With Mrs. Dull, more so than with any of the other classic Southern cookbook authors, I always had this absolute confidence that every recipe would work, a sense that she was intimate with them, that she wrote from experience,” says Atlanta chef Scott Peacock. We should be grateful to the University Press of Georgia for making this classic of Southern cooking once again easily available.

—Thomas Head

Camp Shoals

by Angie Mosier

Come April, the SFA stakes its camp tent in the “quad cities” of Northwest Alabama. Muscle Shoals, Florence, Sheffield, and Tusculumbia make up the quartet of towns, all within 10 driving minutes from each other. Fashion designer Natalie Chanin first piqued our interest when she launched a springtime collection using real people as models, cooking in their kitchens, using their own recipes, but wearing her couture.

Natalie, the talent behind Project Alabama, and the brand new Alabama Chanin line, loves “crafts of the hand.” And while sewing and quilting is what she heralds in her work, she happens to bake delicious biscuits too. The parallels between what Natalie celebrates in stitching and what the SFA celebrates in food are strong, and when the two found out about each other, a plan was born.

A tribe of Natalie’s friends and colleagues—photographers,

sculptors, musicians, and another great Southern fashion designer, Billy Reid—began hosting an Alabama Adventure Weekend in the spring of each year. It is a way to turn locals on to the art that is being produced in the area, and a way to draw outlanders in to see what is going on there. Each year the event grows, and for 2007, these kind Shoals folk have invited the SFA to plan a Day Camp around their event.

In addition to cultural and culinary exploration of the area, chefs Frank Stitt and Scott Peacock—both natives of Alabama—will work with local cooks to create a feast for us. And Joe York will shoot and then screen a short film on the area. We will study and celebrate charity chicken stew, rabbit ranches, watercress patches, the Muscle Shoals sound, and where folk culture meets high fashion. Mark your calendars for Camp Muscle Shoals, April 20–21.

Recycling Oyster Shells: The South Carolina Story

by Timothy C. Davis

With the closing of most of its oyster canneries and shucking houses over the last two decades, you'd think South Carolina would be swimming in oysters—or, at the very least, there would be a lot of oysters swimming in South Carolina. And you'd be right. Harvest levels are more or less the same as they have been for 20 years.

However, as a result of these closings, and with the growing popularity of oyster roasts and bulk sales to restaurants, the state is experiencing an ever-burgeoning shortage of shucked shells, which are used by oystermen and conservationists to restock and cultivate both new and existing oyster beds.

So where are these shucked shells going? Some go into driveways and flower gardens. A few are used for decorative purposes. Some go into traditional medicines, others into the making of lime. Most, however, go straight into the trash.

To combat this shortage, the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources recently started an Oyster Recycling and Restoration Program. They even named an oyster habitat and recycling coordinator, Andy Jennings. Call him the Oysters-Rocky Feller. Jennings recently explained the process to Myrtle Beach's *Sun News*.

"When the oysters spawn, the spat (oyster larvae) is looking for a place to settle down and start building its own shell," Jennings said. "Oyster shell is the best material [for the spat to attach to] for several reasons.

"[The oyster shell is] already out there so we're not changing the marsh ecosystem. We're putting something out there that is natural—it's a natural substrate for them." Replenishing the oyster beds with cultch (material for spat attachment) also enhances the natural habitat in estuaries for numerous other species such as shrimp and crabs. Moreover, it helps support the state's local fishermen and restaurateurs, something that, unlike eating oysters, is in good taste all year long.

Put another way, it's always an "R month" for recycling.

The SCDNR has established 16 recycling locations along the state's coast to help in the collection of the shells. See a list at <http://saltwaterfishing.sc.gov/oyster.html>



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