Gravy

WINTER
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A FOOD LETTER
FROM THE SOUTHERN FOODWAYS ALLIANCE

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ABOUT GRAVY

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Fabulous FAT

by Gillian Clark

HEALTH WARNINGS have done plenty for our biomedical awareness, but little to improve the taste of our food. The army of finger-wagging plate snatchers is like a UN Peacekeeping Force, dedicated to making us eat healthy, whether we want to or not.

They came after palm oil, a staple in Asian, African, and Caribbean cooking. The rust-colored fat—used for seasoning not frying—was labeled an artery-clogging extravagance. The Center for Science in the Public Interest said palm oil, which is high in saturated fat and low in polyunsaturated fat, promotes heart disease. CSPI, the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute, the World Health Organization (WHO), and other health authorities have urged reduced consumption of palm oil.

And then it was coconut oil, the high-smoke-point fat behind the great taste of movie theatre popcorn. According to CSPI, coconut oil is a highly saturated fat. After an intense campaign, the oil was banned from theater popcorn and denounced by the CSPI. Foods that contain coconut oil are disparaged in the CSPI newsletter alongside the likes of Domino's Pasta Bread Bowl and Hardee's Thickburger.

I keep a greasy jar of palm oil in my cupboard, and I miss the way movie theatre popcorn used to smell and taste. But I grew up in a household that appreciated the flavor of fats.

> *That can of bacon fat was a symbol. It meant that my father, who did most of the cooking in our house, cared what our food tasted like.*

When I was growing up, a Chock Full of Nuts coffee can, into which my father tipped the bacon fat from the pan, sat on our Formica counter. The drippings from Sunday morning's bacon collected over the weeks. A cloudy, schmaltzy solid filled the can that stood ready by the stove. My father reheated leftover dumplings in this smoky "butter." He added it soups. He used it to sauté green beans and to cook cabbage. It supplemented the Wesson oil in which the fish burbled.

That can of bacon fat was a symbol. It meant that my father, who did most of the cooking in our house, cared what our food tasted like. We did not suffer on the nights bacon fat was absent from our meals. There were times when bacon fat was required. And there were times it was the lagniappe. No matter, when that aroma wafted through the house, day or night, it was Sunday morning again.

But then came the fateful news: Reserved bacon grease had been linked to gastro-intestinal cancers. My father, a two-time cancer survivor, did not hesitate to trash his coffee can, heavy with months of drippings. Bacon fat was reserved no longer in the Clark household.

I was the chubby kid in a household of seven. I cleaned my plate. I craved the fatty rim of the pork chop. I could not choke down brisket unless each bite was accompanied by that strip of fat. I pulled on chicken legs as if I were starving, delighting in the skin and the edible plastic that covered the bone at the joint.

As a chef, I feel bound to take liberties. I put taste over what the food police consider healthy.

Bacon fat is a precious commodity in my kitchen. I render it from applewood-smoked bacon and store it in canning jars. I save chicken fat, too. It takes two pounds of chicken fat and one pound of bacon fat to cook the collard greens. Butter is everywhere in my kitchen. I use it for mounting the sauce, binding the gravy.

When Passover comes around I need the chicken fat for my matzoh balls. How else do you hold them together? Chicken fat replaces butter when I cook kosher. And it sweetens the frying oil for the latkes.

As cooks and eaters interested in the culture and history of our larder, we put faith in the time-worn ways we've long prepared things. We understand that there is more to sustenance than a full belly. Eating has to be more than the intake of calories.

We were meant to enjoy food. We could survive on baked sweet potato and water. Nutritionally, both have all our bodies need to survive. When the first cook put heat to the kill over the first fire, it became apparent that there was more to satisfying hunger than stuffing a hole.

As an evolving species, it is our responsibility to do things just for the taste of it. It is our duty to resist the fat thieves as if their threat were the burning of books.

Gillian Clark, Washington D.C.-based chef and owner of The General Store and Post Office Tavern*, is at work on a second book,* The Colorado Kitchen Cookbook*, and a collection of short pieces and recipes based upon her radio essays on NPR's* Weekend Edition*. Photo by Thomas Head.*

EATONVILLE
FLORIDA

NOVELS:
JONAH'S GOURD
MULES &
THEIR EYES
WERE WATCH
GOD.
ALICE WALK
LARRY NEA
ACKING
ES, GUAVAS
4 BOOKS to
CREATIVE
Comp. 27
AA DEGREE 29
1st STORY PUBLISHED
to HARLEM 1926
GHES & White woman MASON

EATONVILLE ON THE POTOMAC

by Thomas Head

ANDY SHALLAL owned several successful restaurants in Washington, D.C. and its suburbs, but he was troubled that his client base at the restaurants—almost 100 percent white—continued to be so different from the demographics of D.C., a city in which blacks make up about 55 percent of the population.

Shallal saw the opening of his restaurant Busboys and Poets, located in the U Street corridor, the historic center of black culture in the Capital, as a chance to rectify this imbalance. The name of the restaurant came from the life of Langston Hughes, who worked as a busboy at the Wardman Park Hotel in the 1930s before he became recognized as a poet. Shallal thinks of his restaurants as community centers as well as places to eat—Busboys and Poets includes a bookstore and a diverse program of cultural events.

But as popular as Busboys and Poets had become, it still did not fulfill Shallal's vision of an establishment where the racial balance reflected that of the community. When space became available in a new building across the street from Busboys and Poets, he saw it as an opportunity to create a place equally appealing to blacks and whites.

Shallal had read Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. He was aware that the novelist grew up in Eatonville, Florida, one of the first all-black towns formed after the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. And he knew that D.C. played a part in Hurston's life. While she wrote and attended classes at Howard University, Hurston had worked as a maid and chauffeur to the local gentry.

So Eatonville the restaurant was born. From the very beginning, Shallal saw it as a way of paying respect to Hurston's enormous energy and dedication to her craft. It was also a way of demonstrating that Washington was an important literary center.

The restaurant was greeted by more than a little skepticism. Here was an Iraqi, who came to this country when he was 11 years old, starting a restaurant that paid homage to an African-American writer.

Here was a restaurant, named after an all-black town, serving a menu calculated to appeal to a black clientele. “For the first year,” Shallal says, “the question most frequently asked the servers was ‘Is the owner black?’”

“I wanted to incorporate the traditions of a community into a restaurant, and it took a while to get it right,” recalls Shalal. He was determined to make his African-American clientele feel that their traditions were being respected, not exploited. But that did not go as planned. He hired an opening chef who created a menu of gussied-up versions of the foods that Shallal had envisioned as the menu’s core. (Chef and owner parted ways before the restaurant even opened.)

By chef two, Shallal got it right. On chef Rusty Holman’s current menu, gumbo, fried green tomatoes, hushpuppies, catfish, grits, and collards take center stage. “Often the adjustments I made were as simple as keeping a bottle of hot sauce on the table,” Shallal says. “I didn’t realize it at first, but that seems to signal that African-Americans are welcome.”

“The choice of music, even the art on the walls,” Shallal says, “plays a part in getting the community to trust you.” He has organized a series of Food & Folklore dinners at the restaurant, evenings that pay homage to Hurston’s training as an anthropologist as well as her literary accomplishment. These have included an evening with Valerie Boyd, one of Hurston’s biographers, and a night with Camille Akeju, director of the Anacostia Community Museum. Scheduled for January, 2010, is an event with Annette Gordon-Reed, author of *The Hemingses of Monticello*.

Andy Shallal’s is determined that his restaurants be places in which community is as important as food. As an eleven-year-old Iraqi immigrant—with darker skin and curlier hair than most of his white classmates—he found it easier to identify as African American than as white. What’s more, his training as an artist played a part in forming his vision of an integrated life in which individual creativity and community, tradition and innovation, art and food—all play an important part. The success of his restaurants—particularly of Eatonville, which now has a clientele that nears 60 percent black—seems to show it’s a vision shared by many.

Tom Head is a Louisiana-born-and-bred food and travel writer based in Washington, D.C. Photos by Thomas Head.

JUST SHOOT ME

by Hanna Raskin

Bamboo Ladies
bamboo pickles
Net Wt 8 oz
Bamboo Ladies
bamboo pickles

BAMBOO is the armadillo of the plant world.

The tastiest bits of the fast-growing grass are shielded by a tough outer casing that only a machete can penetrate. Eaters in places where bamboo is popular, such as Nepal and Indonesia, tend to harvest bamboo shoots when they're young and pliable, opting not to mess with the ossified old stalks.

But when a single plant smuggled home by a W.A.C. stationed in Panama blossomed into a bamboo grove in Wilkes County, North Carolina, the women there set about finding a way to put bamboo on their dining room tables. For most cooks, the experimentation ended in exasperation.

"We tried the stir fry, and it didn't work too well," sighs Babe Walsh Faw, whose late mother Johnsie Walsh was given seven bamboo sprigs by her aunt in 1970. Still, the Walshes kept at it, adapting a bamboo pickle recipe Faw's great-aunt had developed.

"It was a pickle, but it wasn't the pickle we wanted," Faw recalls. "It had too much salt."

That pickle, perfected, is now available to the public under the label Bamboo Ladies, a small-scale venture that Faw's daughter Carla Squires began in 2006. Faw says the tangy bamboo rings have been a tremendous hit with most everyone who has sampled them.

The bamboo harvest begins in early May, when the family starts checking their bamboo for hints that it's time to start cutting. "Cutting bamboo is hot, and it's physically demanding," says Squires, who wades into her family's four-acre bamboo forest clad in boots and a plastic raincoat to protect her from ticks and snakes. Like her mother and grandmother before her, she cuts down the ripe bamboo shoots and drags them to the edge of the grove for slicing.

...you can't just hire someone and teach them how to slice. It took three or four years for me to learn.

"I can hire college students or people who aren't working to help me pack, but you can't just hire someone and teach them how to slice," Squires says. "It took three or four years for me to learn."

It takes a practiced slicer like Squires about an hour to slice 10 bamboo stalks; at the harvest's peak, she pulls more than 100 tender stalks each day. When customers pay $7.50 for an eight-ounce jar of bamboo pickles, they're buying, by extension, the long, sweat-drenched day Squires spent carving stalks into slices suited for an antipasto platter.

"I'm trying to figure out if there's anything we can do to make it easier," Squires says. "If I could figure out a way to speed up slicing, we could take it to the next level."

Even before Squires shifted the pickling operation from her grandmother's garage to a shared-use commercial food facility in Asheville, Faw says her family pickled and packed assembly-line style.

"We had it set up like a production thing," she says. "The neighbors would come and just sit and talk. The year mother died, we pulled her wheelchair out in the garage, and she oversaw everything."

Annual output under Walsh's supervision hovered around 300 jars, nearly all of which showed up in housewarming baskets and Christmas stockings. "We have a large family," Faw says. "There were probably 40 in the extended family, and there was just a few that didn't like the pickles. I say try it with your black-eyed peas or pinto beans."

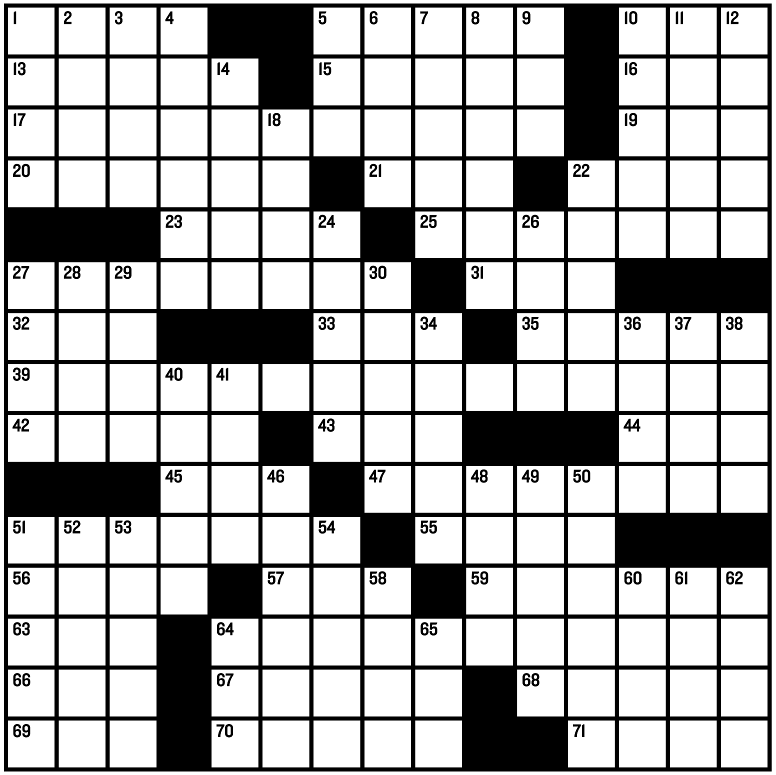
Squires now produces 2000 jars a year. She sticks to her grandmother's recipe, but she wonders what "Meemaw would think if she saw us running around with these pickle jars."

Bamboo Ladies bamboo pickles are available at specialty retailers across North Carolina, and online at www.bambooladies.com.

Hanna Raskin is the food editor of the Mountain Xpress *in Asheville, North Carolina, and AOL Food's southern food correspondent. She also curates edible adventures under the auspices of The American Table Culinary Tours. Photos courtesy Carla Squires.*

THE GRITS AND GRAVY CROSSWORD PUZZLE

by Michele Humes



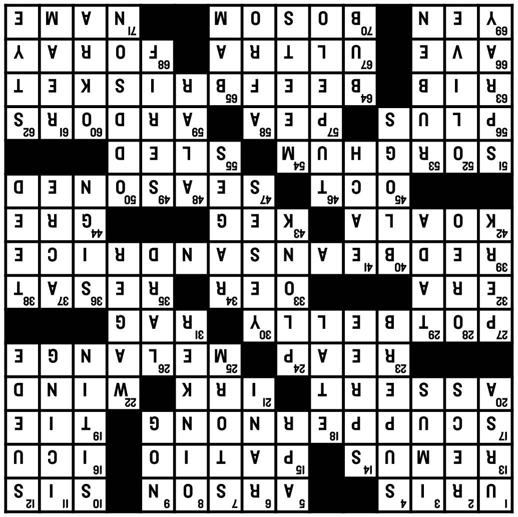
ACROSS

1. “A God in Ruins” novelist
5. Match play?
10. Female sib
13. Br’er Bear biographer
15. Place to lounge
16. Post-E.R. place
17. Thick-skinned wild fruit that makes a musky, floral wine
19. Draw
20. Declare with confidence
21. Get to
22. Zephyr is one
23. Harvest
25. Gallimaufry
27. Southern food side-effect?
31. Tabloid
32. Antebellum, for one
33. “Star-Spangled Banner” preposition
35. Took again, as an exam
39. It’s made on Mondays in Louisiana
42. Eucalyptus eater
43. Frat party essential
44. Test for a college sr.
45. Southern Foodways Symposium mo.
47. It can be said of both a cook and his food
51. “This year’s ____, essence of sun and rain and light and earth, was poured, hot still from the evaporators, upon biscuits. We ate, and tongues were burned.” Clare Leighton, Southern Harvest
55. Gravity-powered vehicle
56. Furthermore
57. It may have a black eye
59. Passions
63. It comes in a rack
64. A Texas cut of ‘cue
66. Ancient greeting
67. Extreme
68. Inroad
69. Longing
70. Kind of buddy
71. Dub

DOWN

1. Celestial bear
2. Hi-fi spinners: Abbr.
3. Controversial radio host
4. Top of the line
5. When D.S.T. begins
6. Sari-clad royal
7. Eye site
8. See 26-Down
9. Holiday quaff
10. A notable one took place at a Woolworth’s in Greensboro, NC
11. Lady Baltimore topper
12. Blue shoe material
14. Bender
18. Bibliog. space saver
22. Stake
24. Throw down
26. A rendering of an 8-Down
27. Liven (up)
28. Hydrox rival
29. “Et voilà!”
30. Toadies’ replies
34. Tantrums
36. Communicate silently
37. Ranch unit
38. Like some golf balls
40. Threats to traditional media?
41. A pop
46. Southeastern honey plant
48. Banned apple spray
49. Printing flourish
50. Presumptive
51. Ocean phenomenon
52. Cocktail garnish
53. American Idol Studdard
54. Track events
58. Alternative to a fade
60. “There is a documented case in a Little Rock household of a transplanted New Yorker who declined a serving of fried ____ on the ground that he was a vegetarian. The man seemed to be under the impression that each segment was a tiny crustacean scraped from the bottom of an Arkansas towboat.” Mike Trimble, in the Arkansas Gazette
61. Paper purchase
62. Eye affliction
64. Masculine term of endearment
65. Emeril emission

Michele Humes is a writer and cruciverbalist in Brooklyn, New York.



ANSWERS:

THE MISSION of the Southern Foodways Alliance is to document, study, and celebrate the diverse food cultures of the changing American South.

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Mountain Valley

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