

Gravy

"I'm selling my pork chops, but I'm giving my gravy away." — *Memphis Minnie*

NUMBER 17, WINTER 2005

NEWS FROM THE SOUTHERN FOODWAYS ALLIANCE

New Orleans Museum Celebrates Southern Food and Drink

By Thomas Head

While she was head of the University of New Orleans Foundation, attorney Elizabeth Williams had helped set up two museums, the D-Day Museum and the Ogden Museum. When she left the foundation, she realized that "what I really wanted to do was set up a museum that dealt with my own longtime interests in food, food culture, and food history, and that New Orleans was the perfect place to do it." She soon joined forces with fellow enthusiasts Gina Warner and Matt Konigsmark, formed a 501(c)(3) charitable foundation and the three of them set themselves up as a small board to get things rolling, planning to expand the board later on.

Williams knew from her earlier experience that, in most people's minds, a museum is a building. She didn't have one and didn't want to spend the museum's first few years, and the financial and political capital of its directors, on bricks and mortar. She was eager to get on with the main business of the museum—exploring the glories of Southern food and cooking—well aware that an opening exhibition might give the museum the visibility it needed with the prospective donors who could make a permanent home possible.

The museum's first exhibition, *A Toast of New Orleans*, devoted to the legendary drinks and drinking habits of the city, opened June 12, 2004, at the New Orleans City Centre, a shopping mall next to the New Orleans Superdome. The exhibition closed in August, but will reopen March 10 in the US Mint in the French Quarter. As curator Elizabeth Pearce notes, "Drinks can be taken for granted; they wash down a po'boy or keep us cool inside a sticky, sultry jazz club, and they are as important as the food, music, and architecture in making New Orleans unique."

A second exhibition, *Tout de Sweet—All About Sugar*, is



scheduled to open in June 2005, timed to coincide with the SFA's 2005 field trip to New Orleans. The sugar exhibition, which will also be housed in a shopping center, will be devoted to the sugar culture of the South—history, families, politics, slavery, current issues, recipes, innovative modern uses of sugar, traditional sugar sculpture, even the Sugar Bowl.

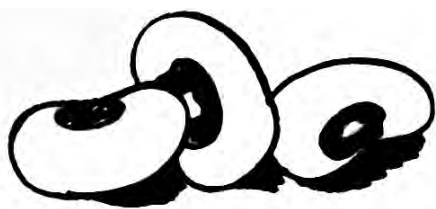
It is hoped that the exhibitions will give the museum visibility, but meanwhile the board is going on with behind-the-scenes activity that will make the institution a valuable resource for research on Southern foodways. An agreement has been reached with the University of New Orleans to house the museum's culinary archive, which will include a comprehensive collection of menus from Southern restaurants. Southern University will catalog and describe the artifacts that the museum collects. Several other institutions have expressed interest in partnering with the museum for research purposes.

The search for a permanent home for the museum continues. Elizabeth Williams envisions it as a cultural center where visitors can experience the food and drink of the South in all its complexity—the many ethnicities that have combined to create the South; the farmers, fishermen, and hunters who have produced the region's food; the inventors, chefs, business people, and home cooks who pass it on. In addition to exhibitions and research opportunities, the museum will eventually encompass a test and demonstration kitchen, lectures and demonstrations, perhaps even a restaurant. "A huge number of people are turning this into a labor of love," says Elizabeth Williams.

SFA members who would like to learn more about the Southern Food and Beverage Museum may find information at www.southernfood.org.

New Board Member

Mike “Rathead” Riley joined the SFA board in December. He will lead our annual giving and capital campaigns. A native of Jacksonville, Florida, Riley now lives in Bristol, Virginia, and works—as a financial services consultant—in Bristol, Tennessee. He is an avid culinary enthusiast who works on the steering committee for his local farmers market. Riley has extensive experience in nonprofit stewardship, having served on orchestra, theatre, and school boards. He is proud of his daughter, Sawyer, who earned a degree in Southern Studies from the University of Mississippi and recently began an internship with Southern Progress.



Remember the call to action issued at the symposium?

SFA board member Adrian Miller organized and held a dinner to bring in the New Year for the 300 residents of the Samaritan House, Denver, Colorado’s largest homeless shelter. Adrian served a diverse crowd the obligatory black-eyed peas for luck (graciously donated by Glory Foods) along with other Southern foods.

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BREAKING NEWS: Revised Dates for 2005 Field Trip

Because of a crowded summer schedule in New Orleans, the NEW dates for this summer’s Field Trip are July 7-10. Mark your calendars and look for more in the next *Gravy*.

The Pat Conroy Cookbook: Recipes of My Life

By Pat Conroy with Suzanne Williamson Pollack
Doubleday, 2004; \$26.



I’ve been a devoted fan of Pat Conroy’s fiction since being inspired by *The Water Is Wide* when I was studying elementary education at the University of Texas many years ago. As I devoured each eagerly awaited subsequent book, I learned that Conroy’s fiction is often enriched by the emotional experiences of his personal life. When his fictional characters began to demonstrate a passion for food and cooking, I suspected we might be kindred spirits. I already knew we are both Southerners, but Conroy appeared to be revealing a profound love of food and the pleasure of sharing it with others—something else we certainly have in common. My suspicions were confirmed with the arrival of Conroy’s cookbook, which he describes as his “autobiography in food.” Once it arrived, I couldn’t put it down, vicariously spending an entire weekend with the author and all the folks with whom he loves to cook and eat. Conroy makes the point that a “recipe is just a story with a good meal at the end,” and goes on to serve up hilarious stories, poignant anecdotes, and revealing vignettes, sauced and garnished with mouth-watering recipes.

Why Dying Down South Is More Fun leads to pickled shrimp, a unique macaroni, and country ham with bourbon glaze. The touching story about Conroy preparing the bridesmaids’ luncheon for his daughter Megan’s wedding brings forth cucumber soup, swordfish salad, and an heirloom pound cake recipe. There’s everything from low country oyster roasts to Roman home cooking, all from the pen of a master storyteller. Read this book, cook from it, savor it. It’s a wonderful read, and it eats every bit as good as it reads, as well. I am once again totally smitten. And Mr. Conroy, if you go before I do, I’ll be proud to come to your funeral and bring pickled shrimp.

—Virginia Wood

Founder’s Oral History Project

In October, the Southern Foodways Alliance—with funding support from Jim ‘N Nick’s—launched its Founders Oral History Project. At the helm is Amy Evans (named “one of the most fearsome talents in wine and food by *Food & Wine* magazine). This important undertaking will forever preserve the history of the SFA through interviews with the organization’s 50 founding members. By recruiting active members in locations across the country to conduct the interviews, SFA supporters have the opportunity to be more actively involved in its mission—and its history.

If you would like to get involved, e-mail Amy at amy_evans@usa.net.

In Memoriam: Laron Morgan

By Virginia Wood

The Central Texas barbecue family lost one of its most accomplished pit masters on November 6, 2004. Laron Morgan, co-owner of Elgin's Crosstown B-B-Q (202 South Avenue C., 512-281-5594), died of an apparent heart attack at the age of 51. The Elgin native had worked in the barbecue business around Elgin, declared the "Sausage Capital of Texas" by the state legislature in 1995, since graduation from high school there in the early 70s. Laron finally achieved his lifelong dream of owning his own restaurant in 1988 when he and partner Carroll Grady opened Crosstown B-B-Q in a small cinder-block building facing Elgin's railroad tracks. With most of Elgin's famous barbecue attractions located out on the highway, the original Crosstown spot was one of those places you might not have bothered to find if a fellow barbecue lover hadn't raved about it.

The original location wasn't particularly glamorous, but what it lacked in style and comfort was more than made up for in the great taste of the food and the hospitality of the owners. The decorations were simple, nothing but a framed copy of a *New York Times* write-up attesting to the quality of the barbecue, an old TV set, and a big selection of high school sports trophies. The popularity of their barbecue made it possible for the partners to move the business to a big new building on the edge of downtown Elgin in the late 90s. Not long after the move, the new building caught fire and had to be replaced. Though the faded *Times* review and the trophies were lost, the Crosstown spirit survived and the restaurant was open again in about three months.

Business has been smokin' in the new building ever since, with the rotisserie pit turning out mouth-watering ribs rubbed

with brown sugar and spices, tender chicken, juicy brisket, and Laron's distinctive homemade sausage. In a town where the sausage-making and meat-smoking tradition goes back more than a hundred years, Laron was one of Elgin's newer pit masters, but he certainly made his mark. "He really loved to feed people and he always knew just how he wanted things to taste, so they'd be the best," says his widow, Dorothy Morgan.

My favorite Crosstown memory is from the Southern Foodways Alliance field trip in the summer of 2002—a busload of Southern food enthusiasts already overstuffed after a day of eating on the Central Texas barbecue trail, voraciously devouring Laron's excellent ribs and sausage, moaning and sighing in ecstasy. These were folks from the pork-obsessed Deep South, who had begun the day convinced Texas barbecue couldn't have much to offer them. Crosstown was the perfect place to end the bus tour—the big, affable Morgan converted them all.

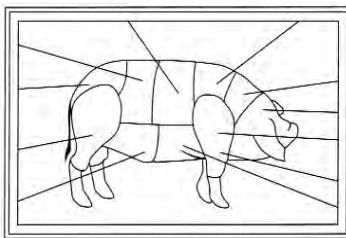
Laron Morgan loved his family, feeding people barbecue, and spending time with his beloved hunting dogs, with which he won several awards from the American National Bird Hunters Association. There is some comfort in knowing he and one of his prized hunters were participating in a field trial the Saturday morning that he collapsed. Laron leaves behind a large family and a legion of friends and customers to mourn his untimely passing. Dorothy Morgan assures me Crosstown B-B-Q will remain open, in the able hands of Carroll Grady and longtime employee Johnny Parks. Make a point of stopping in there as a tribute to Laron Morgan the next time you're in Elgin.

Iconic Southern Restaurants: Blue & White, Tunica, Mississippi

By Jeff Siegel

Gambling has changed Tunica, Mississippi, in so many ways that it's impossible to list all of them. But one thing that has remained—so far, anyway—is the Blue & White.

One day, perhaps, the rising cost of real estate will do what the rising cost of real estate always does to places like the Blue & White, which has been a landmark almost since it opened in 1937. Until then, the Blue & White remains what it has always been—solid, dependable, Southern cooking for breakfast, lunch, and dinner in solid, dependable Southern cooking surroundings. The gas pumps are gone, but the big blue and white sign remains, which means it's almost impossible to



miss the restaurant, located on U.S. Hwy. 61 just far enough south of most of the casinos and development.

One highlight at the Blue & White is real red-eye gravy, made with ham drippings and leftover coffee and served with Virginia ham. This is an acquired taste, salty and dark, but for anyone who remembers what it's supposed to taste like—or who wants to try—it's almost worth the drive down from Memphis. Needless to say, the grits and biscuits are up to the quality of the gravy.

Blue & White Restaurant, 1355 US Highway 61 N, Tunica, Mississippi; 662-363-1371

The Menu Project

By Elizabeth Williams

Researching food trends, menu design, restaurant fads, and the economics of food will be easier because of the Menu Project of the Southern Food and Beverage Museum, begun in conjunction with the University of New Orleans. The Museum, working with state restaurant associations, is systematically collecting menus from restaurants from every Southern state. The menus will be collected every year and put into a database, to form a rich source of material for future researchers. The Museum is collecting as many menus as it can get, both from small holes-in-the-wall and white tablecloth places.

Members of the Southern Foodways Alliance can participate in building this important research tool by sending us a menu from all of your restaurant meals. Your help will ensure that no menu falls through the cracks. The Museum wants the collection to be as complete as possible. And of course we would welcome any older menus that you may be ready to part with. We have a growing core of menus and hope to build it through the continued cooperation of restaurants and diners.

Help us create this database by sending your menus to Southern Food and Beverage Museum, 1435 Jackson Avenue, New Orleans, LA 70130.

Symposium Call for Presentations

The eighth annual Southern Foodways Symposium will take place October 27-30, 2005, on the campus of the University of Mississippi in Oxford. This year, we examine sugar and sweetness. We seek presentations informed by research, fieldwork, and scholarship, but geared to an informed popular audience. Proposals should be one page in length and contain the following: the name of the presenter along with two professional references concerning skills and qualifications, the title or theme, a brief description of the subject matter, anticipated length, and your preferred format.

While we invite you to propose any presentation on a sugar-related topic concerning the American South, we encourage proposals that explore dessert rituals during the holidays, competitive food events involving sugar, historical profiles of particular desserts, beverages using sugar, sugar and commerce, and profiles of sugar product artisans. Please electronically submit your proposals by March 15, 2005, to John T. Edge at johnt@olemiss.edu.

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