
SFA
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SFA GRAVY

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Snack break on Snow's Bend Farm, Alabama



THIS PAGE: Andrea K. Mabry

**ON THE COVER:** Illustration by Simone Martin-Newberry

# A LITTLE BIT SOFTER NOW

## Hope springs; spring hopes

BY SARA CAMP MILAM

Alan Hill via Adobe Stock

LATELY I NOTICE A SHIFT IN MY editorial quirks. In years past, I declared my distaste for stories about grandmas and farms. They're too expected, I said. I've heard them all before, I believed. "I don't care about your grandma!" I even proclaimed from more than one podium. And I fretted over what I believed to be an excess of personal essays in food media, to the exclusion of original reporting. Excuse me while I procure a knife and fork with which to eat my words. In this issue of *Gravy*, you'll read personal essays. You'll read farm stories. You'll read, yes, a personal essay about farming. And you know what? It's beautiful, and I love it, and so will you. No grandmas here, but the way things are going, I might be convinced to rescind my moratorium. Call me soft. Call me old. Call me human.

On-the-ground reporting was much harder this past year. Still, *Gravy* writers and podcast producers found creative, effective, and safe ways to tell stories. Many turned logistical challenges into opportunities for reflection. They didn't bring themselves into their stories to navel-gaze, but rather to illuminate larger truths and give voice to shared emotions and experiences. They used narrative to approximate camaraderie in a year of isolation. I believe that's a kind of hope.

For those of you wondering (ie, no one), I have yet to invest in the punching bag I considered in my last editor's note. I still have days when it would come in handy. But, for the first time in more than a year, I'm writing this editor's note from my desk at SFA World Headquarters (SFAWHQ) in Barnard Observatory on the University of Mississippi campus. I'm grateful that working from home remains an option, but I'm *beyond* grateful that I can be here. As I type this, my colleague Annemarie Anderson, SFA's oral historian, is on the phone in her office, giving an interview on slugburgers for a podcast. By the time this issue of *Gravy* hits mailboxes, we'll have a new full-time colleague on Team SFA. Zaire Love, an alumna of the MFA program in Documentary Expression at UM, becomes our second Pihakis Documentary Filmmaker in April.

The sun is out, the weather is warm, and the daffodils are blooming. Pending babysitter availability, my husband and I are contemplating our first dine-in restaurant meal in thirteen months. I'll take these bits of hope and run with them, thank you very much.

> In the last year, *Gravy* writers have turned logistical challenges into opportunities for narrative reflection.

Here's one more—a very specific wish I borrowed from a lockdown-era conversation with my colleague Melissa Hall. I hope that, by the end of 2021, we'll hold weekly staff meetings in person here at SFAWHQ, eating Swedish Fish out of a communal bag the way we did before COVID. We're not there yet. Maybe we won't get there this year. But it's spring, and I'm giving myself permission to daydream.

**Faron Levesque** is a writer, historian, and food justice activist based in Memphis, TN. They run a community teaching kitchen (The Cornbread Academy) and free food program (Fieldchow) for AOVS Urban Farm. Faron is also a PhD candidate in history at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Their essay in this issue is the first in a multipart series on Food, Justice, & Queer Memphis. When the pandemic ends, they plan to race down I-55 to New Orleans for a birthday dinner redo at Nina Compton's Compère Lapin and then pop over to Snow's BBQ in Lexington, Texas, to show pit-boss Tootsie Tomanetz some love.


**Simone Martin-Newberry** is an illustrator and graphic designer whose work is guided by a love of color, texture, movement, and rhythm. In addition to the cover for this issue of *Gravy*, she has created art for *The New York Times*, *The Guardian US*, and Chronicle Books, to name a few. Originally from Los Angeles, she now lives, works, and gardens in Chicago. Post-pandemic, she dreams of outdoor adventures—hikes and camping trips that will get her out of her apartment and back into nature. But first, she'll head to California to visit the family she hasn't seen in a year.

**Adrian Miller** is a James Beard Award–winning writer, attorney, and certified barbecue judge who lives in Denver, Colorado. He is the executive director of the Colorado Council of Churches. He previously served as a special assistant to President Bill Clinton and as a senior policy analyst for Colorado Governor Bill Ritter Jr. Adrian's third book, *Black Smoke: African Americans and the United States of Barbecue,* will be published in April 2021. He is the guest editor for *Gravy*'s summer issue, which comes out in July. When the pandemic ends, he'll head to Dubai to represent the United States at Expo 2020 (held in 2021).

TOP TO BOTTOM: Brandon Dill, Courtesy of Simone Martin-Newberry, Ryan Dearth

**Matthew Raiford** grew up on his family's Georgia farm. After a military career, then graduation from the Culinary Institute of America, Raiford returned to the farm in 2011. He received certification as an ecological horticulturalist from the University of California-Santa Cruz Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems. Raiford served as the executive chef at the Lodge on Little St. Simons Island, opened (and closed) his own restaurant, and in 2017 was named a semifinalist for Best Chef: Southeast by the James Beard Foundation. His first cookbook, *Bress 'N' Nyam*, comes out in May.

**Margaret Ann Snow** is the cofounder, with her husband, David, of Snow's Bend Farm, just outside Tuscaloosa, Alabama. In 2004, after an internship in Washington state left them both highly addicted to fresh, organic produce and to the satisfaction that comes from physical, purposeful work outdoors, they started the farm. Margaret Ann plants, tends, harvests, washes, and markets anything and everything that will grow in Alabama soil. Once fully vaccinated, she'll visit the Legacy Museum in Montgomery, Alabama, and then spend a weekend in Birmingham eating out.

**John B. Spohrer Jr.** is a graduate of Louisiana State University and a U.S. Army Veteran. Since 1980, he has lived on the Gulf Coast of Florida, where he works as a photographer and writer. He has received special recognition from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission for "fostering an appreciation of Florida's fish and wildlife" and has has exhibited his photography at galleries across the Southeast. Post-pandemic, he worries that his wife will make good on her threat to take him on a vacation to the south of France.

TOP TO BOTTOM: Siobhán Egan & Bevin Valentine Jalbert, David Snow, Russ Norwood


I'M A WRITER, COOK, AND RECIPE DEVELOPER. I'VE BEEN LIVING IN Albuquerque for the past few years, but by the time you read these words, I'll be back my hometown of North Charleston, South Carolina. We don't have the cobblestone streets they have downtown, but there is history in North Charleston, stories and lives that deserve to be recognized and celebrated. There are historic Black communities all over this city. When I say North Charleston, I talk about home and family. Not just blood relatives, because everybody here is a play cousin. You are always welcome somewhere.

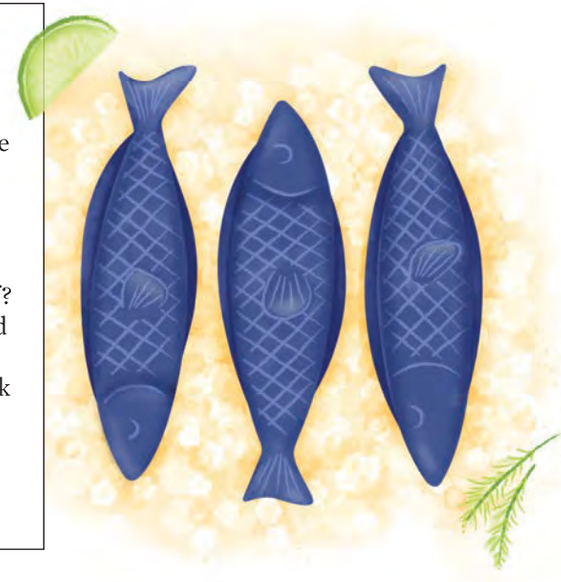
Everybody represents their community. I grew up in the Chicora-Cherokee neighborhood. We call it "Tha Macon" and our sign is M$M. People who live in the Heights call their neighborhood The Hike. If you're from Dorchester Road you live on "D-Road" or "Dorchedda Road." That naming is how we make a place specifically ours. You can be driving down the road, with your windows rolled down, and start a conversation with the lady in the car in the other lane, who also has her windows open. And you can sit there talking for a while. People are friendly like that.

### Caribbean Delight

My grandmother, Sawda Ganaway, talks about them all the time. About their snapper and rice and peas and cabbage. When she talks, I always crave seafood from our waters. Everybody talks about their oxtails, too. Soon as I get home, I'm going to go see my grandmother and tell her to get dressed and let's go to the Caribbean.

### Marvin's Seafood

They've got shrimp and blue crab. Whiting and porgy. People are going to be in line talking like they have always talked. You have to know how to order. If you want crabs, do you want male, female or mixed? Do you want your shrimp head on or off? Do you want your whiting scaled and gutted? Did you check the eyes on the porgy? Did you check the gills? I can remember walking in here with my grandma, being hand held, beginning then to learn.



### My Three Sons

This is a new place to me. But I'm hearing good things. About their turkey wings and devil crabs and fried whiting plates. Maybe I'll get a fried shark steak. Or maybe I'll get my grandma to fry me some shark later. In other places, people freak out about shark. We fry it and eat it. I know I'm going to order peach cobbler. We love sweets in my family, but not many in my family know how to make sweets.

### Nana's Seafood & Soul

When I get settled, I'll be almost walking distance. That will be good for Nana's pocket, I'm thinking, and bad for mine. They're a Black-owned business that's now all over social media. Everyone talks about Nana's. And about their crabs in Nana's famous garlic sauce.

Illustrations by Bridgette Blanton / Tiny Pencil Studio

*"Most Visited Places" is an ongoing digital and print series, underwritten by The Mountain Valley Spring Water.*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# CONSIDER THE QUONSET

## In praise of prefab

BY JOHN T. EDGE

WHEN I WAS A FOURTH-YEAR SOPHomore at the University of Georgia, I won a three-nights-a-week security guard job at the Alpha Delta Pi house on Milledge Avenue. My charge was to sit in the sun room from around ten at night until three in the morning and make sure no other boys got inside. I think I got the post because many of my friends were members. I *know* I didn't get the job because I had any security skills.

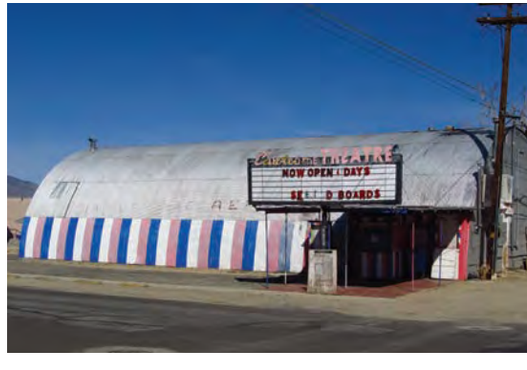
That gig came with perks. Come summer, when the sorority house closed, I lived free in what ADPi called the Little House, a next-door bungalow. The location was ideal. From the porch, I could drink morning coffee and smell peach pies frying across the street at the Varsity Drive-In. Even better, by ten on weekdays, when the wind shifted the right way, I could smell country-fried steak, smothered in onions and gravy, coming off the line at the Chase Street Café.

Set in a retooled Quonset hut, next to a body shop, opposite a wrecker garage, Chase Street was the sort of place where frat boys in polos shared a U-shaped counter with machinists in coveralls and lawyers in seersucker. Owner Mark Hansford kept a sawed-off shotgun under that counter. He moonlighted as a cook at the county jail. On Fridays, he served chicken mull, thickened with crumbled saltine crackers and floated with butter. Living at the Little House, I came to fear Mark and love the lunchtime conversations that bounced off the corrugated metal walls of his Quonset.

BORN AN HOUR downstate from Athens, in a farmhouse built in 1814, I was predisposed to like prefabricated buildings. My mother venerated age and endurance. I rebelled in favor of ready-mades, born of assembly line production. On family road trips, I marveled at the tidy houses sold in Jim Walter Homes lots, imagining a life in which our windows didn't leak and tidy sheetrock instead of flaky plaster covered our walls. A fascination with Quonsets, born of trips to a nearby Army-Navy surplus store set in one of those arched steel buildings, was the next logical step.

Quonsets looked wonky and futuristic, like supersized culverts bisected longways, but the roots of the word are ancient. Quonset means boundary in the language of the Narragansett people who once lived on the land that became the Quonset Point Naval Air Station in Rhode Island. In 1941, engineers there developed the quickly assembled-building.

During World War II, the growth of the US military effort quickly outpaced its infrastructure. The military needed barracks, garages, and storage facilities—and quickly. Ten Seabees, the nickname for members of the Navy's construction




battalion, could assemble a small Quonset between the breakfast and dinner bells. The Navy built or procured more than 150,000 of the structures in a couple of years. And then the war was over.

The first wave of sales began in late December of 1945, when the federal government surplused more than 5,000 Quonsets. Small ones sold for around a thousand dollars. Elephant Quonsets (that's the term they used) cost around thirty-five hundred.

Hawthorne, Nevada by Jasperdo is licensed under CC BY 2.0.

Interiors were blank and spartan and dome-ceilinged, accommodating of whatever a buyer shoved inside.

Colleges and universities bought Quonsets for temporary housing. Nashville's Music Row began when Owen Bradley opened the Quonset Hut studio in the 1950s. Until 1990, press coverage at the Master's Tournament in Augusta, Georgia, centered in a Quonset hut, set with rows of wooden tables where reporters worked. Bars and restaurants, always tight on margins and in need of cheap spaces, also turned to Quonsets.

After World War Two, nightlife in Washington, D.C. revolved around the Quonset Supper Club, home to gangsters, strippers, politicians, and a guitar-playing horse. The Silver Grill in Atlanta, famous for fried chicken, and an early beacon of gay life in that city, began in 1945 in a modified Quonset. In Stuttgart, Arkansas, the Little Chef operated in a big Quonset, serving eggs and grits for breakfast and fried quail for dinner. All have since closed.

MORE COMMON TODAY than Quonsets are restaurants set in repurposed mobile homes, Airstream trailers, shipping containers, and those prefab buildings they sell in Home Depot parking lots. But Quonsets still dot the Southern landscape.

Scroll photos of buildings erected by the Rural Studio, the Auburn University architectural lab in the Alabama Blackbelt, and you see Quonset-inspired designs. Visit Scott's Bar-B-Que in Hemingway, South Carolina, where pitmaster Rodney Scott began his career, and you'll notice that the pit room, rebuilt after a 2013 fire, is a Quonset-inspired structure designed by the Charleston architect Reggie Gibson.

When Mark Hansford closed Chase Street after twenty-eight years in business, he sold the lot and moved the hut seven miles northeast, beside his house on Highway 72 between Hull and Colbert. Since he died in 2015, the hut has sat empty. A few years back, I drove out that way. I couldn't find the Quonset, but I did come home with a realization.

U.S. Marines outside a Quonset hut at Parris Island, SC, 1942

Van B. Higdon Papers, WWII 184, WWII Papers, Military Collection, State Archives of North Carolina, Raleigh, NC.

U.S. Navy Seabees assemble a Quonset hut at Chu Lai, Vietnam, 1966.

U.S. Navy Seabee Museum

Over the last decade, my wife Blair and I have filled our backyard with small buildings made of corrugated metal. I write in one; she paints in the other. We like the way our modern studios gesture to our shared past. Study their profiles and you recognize how our work spaces reference lean-tos and farm sheds. Made from similar materials, these vernacular buildings still line the roads of Alabama and Georgia, where we grew up, and Mississippi where we now live.

On that drive through the countryside beyond Athens, I recognized how the metal buildings where we now work also reference the Quonset huts that captured my youthful imagination. Designed to be built quickly and just as quickly declared surplus, Quonsets have stuck around to serve other purposes, including the writing of this column, which I did under the cover of a corrugated steel roof.

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*John T. Edge is the founding director of SFA and the host of* TrueSouth *on the SEC Network/ESPN.*

*Tell me about the Quonset restaurants of your youth. And the ones that survive today. Write johnt@southernfoodways.org.*

# TACO BURGER FANTASIA

## The trail leads to Vicksburg

BY GUSTAVO ARELLANO

THE PROMPT WAS SIMPLE. A FRIEND had spent some time in Arkansas. He noticed that several of the Mexican restaurants there featured an item he couldn't recall eating elsewhere in the South: taco burgers.

Seasoned ground beef, shredded lettuce, diced tomato, and cheddar cheese. The ingredients of a hard taco, but inside a bun instead of a prefabricated shell. He swore it was good. I believed him.

So, he asked me, in my role as a scholar of Mexican food in the United States and a student of Southern foodways: What's up with taco burgers? How did they end up in small-town Arkansas? Was it yet another genus in the taxonomy of Sur-Mex food, alongside the Speedy Gonzales combo plates and ACP (arroz con pollo) dinners that you find in the South alone?

I had never seen a taco burger in my decade-plus eating my way through the South's Mexican diners, either. But my friend had it wrong. "That's not a taco burger!" I blurted out after he texted a blurry photo. "That's a bun taco."

Same dish, different name, and with a documented history. It's a relic of Cal-Mex cuisine, a direct connection to the roots of fast-food Mexican. The creators of the genre—Glen Bell (of Taco Bell fame), Ed Hackbarth, and Neal Baker, among others—all started with hamburger stands in the 1950s that later added hard-shell tacos as the dish became popular across the United States. They took their inspiration from the chili burger, the irresistible combo of chili con carne on top of a beef patty first made famous by Tommy DeForest at his Ptomaine Tommy restaurant in Los Angeles during the 1920s.

Mexican flavors in hamburger form have attracted Americans for over a century. The style of taco burger my

Illustrations by Bea Hayward

friend ate in Arkansas had its American heyday during the 1970s and 1980s. It appeared on school cafeteria menus, as restaurant specials, and in newspaper food pages. Depending on the region, it went by the taco burger, bun taco, Mexi-burger, Mexoburger, Bellburger, and the Mexican hamburger—although that version was usually with a tortilla instead of bread.

There was nothing distinctly Southern about the taco burger, I was ready to tell my friend.

I was wrong.

Sure, the South is one of the last places where you can easily find them. They're at the Tamolly's Mexican Kitchen chain in the Texarkana region and the Taco Casa chain around Tuscaloosa. Taco burgers pop up on chain-restaurant menus from Mississippi to Georgia to Tennessee—but not in the hundreds of Mexican restaurants run by immigrants from San Jose de la Paz, Jalisco, that have dominated Mexican food in the South for the past forty years.

In California, I know of one restaurant that sells taco burgers, and one chain that keeps it as an off-menu special. That's it. They're not bad.

The taco burger lives in an alternate universe, one where whites still dominate the Mexican restaurant scene and make antiquated meals for an aging, shrinking clientele. The scene is on the wane even in the South, as migration has altered expectations of what Mexican cuisine can be.

My friend's query led me down a rabbit hole of taco burger what-ifs centered in Vicksburg, Mississippi. For a few years in the 1910s, a native son fused Mexican and American foodstuffs decades before it became popular to do so. The experiment went nowhere, but it showed what the South has always offered: a look into the future.

AT THE DAWN of the twentieth century, hamburger meat was a second-generation German American still finding a new identity as a sandwich.

As any good immigrant does, the hamburger mixed with another newcomer, and an offshoot emerged: Spanish hamburger.

It was little more than a standard hamburger steak livened up with tomato sauce. There's nothing Iberian about the meal whatsoever—the tomato, after all, is indigenous to the Americas. But the early 1900s was an era when "Mexican" was a dirty word, even as Americans began to seek out those flavors. So in order to make meals and culture palatable, Mexicans invented a Spanish past and present.

"Spanish hamburger" popped up in cookbooks and meat markets across the United States, including the South. But it never took off like, say, hot tamales or chile con carne. The dish largely disappeared by the 1950s, as tacos began to ascend nationwide and the hamburger sandwich took precedence over its steak version.

One person made a go for Spanish hamburger immortality: Eric W. Halpin, born in Vicksburg in 1878 to a Swedish mother and a German father. While his family remained in Mississippi, Halpin became a traveling salesman for a wholesale food company. Newspaper clippings track him moving through Denver, northern New Mexico, Fort Worth, and El Paso, with visits back home.

The 1910 census found him in Silver City, New Mexico, running a grocery store in the mining town up the highway from the state's chile-growing region. Four years later, he returned to Vicksburg to open his own grocery. He brought along a native New Mexican: green chile.

The fleshy, piquant pepper was virtually unknown outside the American Southwest at the time. For Mexican-style spice, Americans knew Tabasco and Gebhardt Chili Powder, and that was about it. But Halpin saw something in green chile. In 1915, he began mixing it into ground beef to make the Spanish hamburger mix he sold for a quarter a pound at his new Halpin's Market.

His customers loved it.

An ad in the March 20, 1915 edition of the *Vicksburg Evening Herald* boasted that the debut of his green chile-laden Spanish hamburger "has been more popular than he anticipated. You don't have to believe him—make him show you."

Nearly every week, Halpin played up his Mexicanized Spanish hamburger with more enticing ads. "We have had nothing but repeat orders. Everyone likes it. It's different," read one. Another described the meat as "a welcome change from the customary round of beefsteaks, roasts, chops, etc."

The demand for green chile itself grew. By 1918, Halpin stocked canned green chiles and even salsa, which an *Evening Herald* ad described as "a sauce, made of green chile, onions and fresh tomatoes" perfect for "spaghetti, roast or fried oysters."

Halpin's Mexican Spanish hamburger had a good run, but it didn't last. He declared bankruptcy in 1922; by 1927, he was back in the Southwest. He eventually opened a trading post in Cuba, New Mexico. Halpin died at sixty-three in 1942 and was buried in Albuquerque.

He probably won't make it into any histories of Southern or Mexican food. But maybe Halpin should. Food historians focus too often on heroes and villains, winners and losers. We don't pay enough attention to the people and the foods that came and just didn't stick unless we treat them as jokey anomalies. They deserve respect, too. Now, any time I think about taco burgers, I'll think of Halpin—a man ahead of his time.

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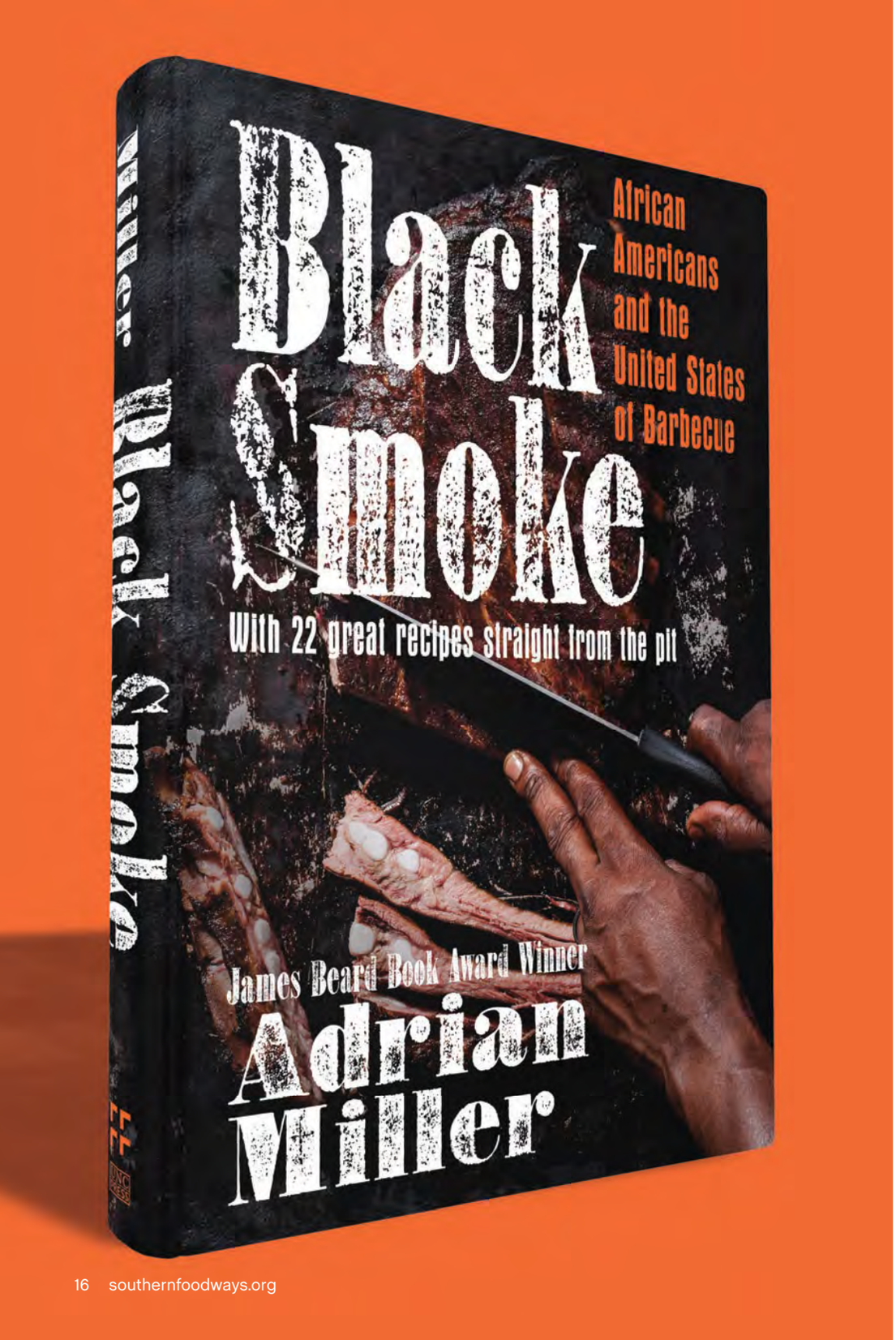
*Gustavo Arellano is Gravy's columnist and a columnist for the* Los Angeles Times.

*Want to know more about Ark-Mex food traditions? Listen to the* Gravy *podcast episode "Mexican-ish: How Arkansas Came to Love Cheese Dip" by Dana Bialek and Tina Antolini.*








# IN THE SMOKE WITH MARIE JEAN

## A barbecue woman who built a freedom fund

BY ADRIAN MILLER

*For many people, barbecue and "Bro" culture often go hand-in-hand. It's all about dudes mastering the primal art of cooking meat over wood. Yet, in African American barbecue culture, Black women are a deep part of the tradition. My late mother, Johnetta Miller, was my family's Barbecuer-in-Chief. That's why I was thrilled to find the story of Marie Jean (Mary John in English), a pitmaster in nineteenth-century Arkansas. The idea of a Black woman telling dudes how to barbecue is just mind-blowing. I hope you enjoy her story. —AM*

"AN IMMENSE BARBECUE WAS prepared. Buck's Tavern cooking was represented in superior style. Col. James Scull owned cooks unequalled in the culinary art in this or any other land, who occupied the first position. Mary John, the memory of whose splendid dinners at the Post of Arkansas, will never be forgotten by the few survivors of her day, was on the grounds, superintending."

Let what you just read sink in for a moment. That part about "superintending" means that an enslaved African American woman named Marie Jean was in charge of a July Fourth, 1840, barbecue in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, when the town was a little more than a year old. Today, we would call this person a pitmaster. Just picture it: an enslaved African American woman telling a large, likely all-male, team of cooks and waiters, how to properly pursue one of the manliest of culinary pursuits . . . *in the South, two decades before the Civil War*. She shattered the forced invisibility of so many before and after her. Without the passage above from the memoir of Judge J. W. Bocage, one of Pine Bluff's city fathers, we may never have known of Jean's prowess as a pitmaster.

Marie Jean's story is so gratifying. Barbecue is presented as sucha hypermasculinized, "for boys only" world that I'm surprised no one is currently marketing a barbecue sauce to, um, improve male performance. We know that women were, and continue to be, integral to fish smoking traditions in West Africa. We also know from Marie Jean's example, and that of so many others, that Black women have been in the barbecue game for a long time. Unfortunately, their stories remain hidden. I'm reminded of the lyrics from the James Brown song, "It's a Man's World": "It's a man's world. It's a man's world. But, it wouldn't be nothing, without a woman."

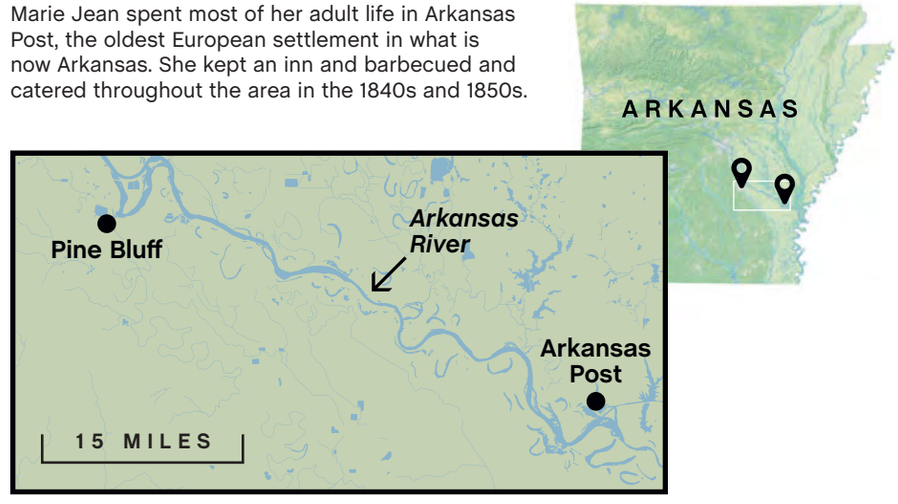
Marie Jean (spelled "Jeanne" in some sources) was a biracial woman who was born enslaved in Arkansas sometime during the 1780s when the French claimed that territory. On July 11, 1793, and quite possibly at a very young age, she married a white man named Michel Baune, who hunted as a profession. The marital notice indicates that the marriage "legitimized" their three children. Her marriage didn't change her legal status as an enslaved Black woman, and it is unclear how long the union lasted. She was owned by different people before Colonel James Scull purchased her in 1811. Scull was a white Brit who resided at Arkansas Post, a bustling trading center and the first European settlement in that area. After the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, the influx of U.S. citizens necessarily changed the area's dominant cultural influence from French to Anglo-American. Marie Jean, well into adulthood at that point, had her name Anglicized, and from that point on, she was called Mary John.

A few months after the July Fourth Pine Bluff barbecue, Mary John had earned, and saved, enough money to do something that changed the course of her life.

> Know all men by these presents that I, James Scull Senr., of the County of Jefferson of the State of Arkansas, have for and in consideration of the sum of eight hundred dollars current money of the United States to me in hand paid before the ensealing and delivery of this bill of sale, the receipt whereof is hereby acknowledged, given and granted, and by these presents doth give and grant unto my slave Mary John her freedom, said Mary being a negro about fifty years old, to have and enjoy the same during life, free from the claim of all persons whomsoever, claiming by or through me or my heirs. In witness whereof I have hereunto set my hand and seal this 13th day of September 1840.

So, how did John earn enough money to buy her freedom? Could it have possibly come from barbecue? In *A Savory History of Arkansas Delta Food*, Cindy Grisham suggests as much, noting that John "made her name catering large events at the plantation homes along the Arkansas River." Whatever her financial source, the fact that John could even build a freedom fund is remarkable.

Once free, she stayed at Arkansas Post to be an entrepreneur, despite the risk of reenslavement by remaining in the antebellum South. An Arkansas County contemporary of Mary John named W. H. Halliburton wrote in his *History of Arkansas County*: "Arkansas Post, the seat of justice of the county (1845–50) was the only village or trading-post within the county limits. Twelve families, with the total of less than one hundred souls, comprised the population of this village. An old free negro named Mary John kept here, the only hotel or public house in the county, which was, perhaps, the most celebrated in the State for the perfection




Marie Jean spent most of her adult life in Arkansas Post, the oldest European settlement in what is now Arkansas. She kept an inn and barbecued and catered throughout the area in the 1840s and 1850s.

of its cuisine." Why Jean remained, we don't know. Perhaps she was so supremely confident in her public reputation that she didn't fear recapture.

Only scraps of information have survived to give us a window on Jean's life. The 1850 Arkansas county census lists "Mary Jean" as a sixty-two-year-old Black woman living at Arkansas Post with W. H. Hand, a thirty-three-year-old man and laborer from North Carolina. There is no indication of his race or what their relationship was. Other than this, there are few official records of Jean's business affairs and her family.

Sadly, the most complete description of Jean's life came to public attention after her death. On May 30, 1857, the *Weekly Arkansas Gazette* ran this obituary using her Anglicized name:

> MARY JOHN is dead—she died some weeks since at the Post of Arkansas. Reader, you may ask, who is Mary John? We will tell you. She was a free negress, as black as the ace of spades, some sixty-five years of age, and weighing smartly over two hundred pounds. She was the servant of the late James Scull, Esq., and in the early days of Arkansas, when he and his good lady kept an open house for every body, Mary John was the cook—and such a cook— Delmonico, if his were at stake could not get up such coffee and venison steaks as Mary John did. She was keeping a boarding house at the old Post, at the time of her death, having purchased her freedom some fifteen years ago. She was much respected, and her death is mourned by many, and among them, her old mistress and her master's children.

Despite some racial condescension, this obituary is extraordinary for its time. It appeared in a majority newspaper with a white readership, Jean's full name is mentioned (a rare occurrence then for a Black person), and she's acknowledged as an accomplished professional. Her life was, and remains, testament to the fact that sisters have a long legacy of doin' it and grillin' it for themselves.

Adobe Stock

# ONE FOOT IN THE SOIL AND ONE IN THE OCEAN

An excerpt from *Bress 'n' Nyam*

BY MATTHEW RAIFORD

THE GULLAH GEECHEE ARE DEFINED BY THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO WATER. It is where we go to feed our families. It is where we return time and again to seek guidance from the ancestors. My family are descended from the Freshwater Geechee, the ones who reshaped the land to craft irrigation systems for rice fields from the brackish rivers and creeks. The Saltwater Geechee farmed cotton and indigo on the Sea Islands and later steered the flat-bottomed bateaux to harvest oysters, which was one of the region's strongest industries until its collapse in the middle of the last century. Even as a mainlander, I have always had one foot in the soil and one in the ocean.

When my mom cleaned houses on St. Simons Island, I learned from the old timers at the pier how to fish. I had a little string tied to my finger, with bait on the end. I would just drop the string in the water and feel the fish playing with the bait. I eventually caught enough fish to sell so that I could buy my own fishing pole. I met a man there who taught me how to make my own crab net. Because of rising and warming seas, loss of ancestral lands to developers, and my own generation's leaving to find jobs in cities, this way of life—the self-sufficiency to never know hunger—is disappearing.

When I was a little older, when my dad went to work at the port docks in Brunswick, he would leave me at Overlook Park to fish for mullet. I used the "snatch" method of throwing out a handful of chicken mash to call forth those gray, oily fish; then I'd toss in a three-pronged hook to snatch as many as I could.

I think that's why I'm so drawn to a tradition we have here called the Blessing of the Fleet. Every Mother's Day in Brunswick, the old Portuguese ritual of asking for the safe passage and prosperous haul of the fishing and shrimping fleets takes place. Shrimpers festoon their trawlers in brilliant flags and parade down the Brunswick River to the ocean, where the priest from St. Francis Xavier drops a flower anchor into the sea to honor the souls of departed fishermen.

The Gullah Geechee people say that "de wata bring we and de wata gwine tek we bak." It's a reminder that how we treat our waters reflects how we treat each other.


Photos by Siobhán Egan

## FRIED FISH AND GRITS

My great-grandfather Horace used to go fishing early nearly every morning. He'd catch a mess. Sometimes he brought back whiting, other times croaker, butterfish, or drum. He'd start a stew of tomatoes, onions, and fresh okra pulled fresh from the field, then dredge the fish in cornmeal and panfry it in a skillet. This was our breakfast, our bacon and eggs.

*Serves 4*

**FOR THE FISH**

- **4 fish fillets**
- **1 teaspoon sea salt**
- **1 cup buttermilk, store-bought or homemade**
- **1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper**
- **1 cup cornmeal or all-purpose flour, based on your preference**
- **1 cup vegetable oil**
- **CheFarmer's Grits**

**FOR THE STEWED OKRA**

- **3 tablespoons unsalted butter**
- **1 onion, finely diced**
- **1 pint okra, sliced**
- **4 large beefsteak tomatoes, roughly chopped**
- **2 teaspoons sea salt**
- **½ teaspoon cracked black pepper**

In a large bowl, season the fish fillets with the salt and pour the buttermilk over the fillets. Set the bowl aside until ready to fry.

In a shallow bowl, combine the pepper and cornmeal or flour.

In a deep cast-iron skillet, heat the vegetable oil on high heat until it reaches 350° to 375°F, according to a deep-fry or candy thermometer.

Pull each fillet out of the buttermilk and dredge through the cornmeal or flour mixture, and then place each fillet in the hot oil. When the fillets have turned a dark golden brown all over, remove from the oil and drain on paper towels.

In another skillet, melt the butter over medium heat. Once it turns brown, add the onions and the okra and sauté for 2 minutes. Add the tomatoes, salt, and pepper and continue cooking, stirring frequently, until the skin on the tomatoes begins to blister. Remove the stewed okra from the heat.

To serve, spoon a healthy dose of grits on a plate. Set a fillet on the grits, then spoon the okra and tomatoes over the fish and grits. You'll be ready to face the day after a plate.

### CheFarmer's Grits

Basic grits require only four ingredients: water, grits, salt, and pepper. They are cooked low and slow until they alchemize into a creamy porridge that is fabulous morning, noon, or night. The quality of your grits matters, and I suggest investing in either Marsh Hen Mill or Anson Mills brands, because they both rely on heirloom grains and old-world production methods. I do, however, add some special ingredients when I want to push my grits over the top.

*Serves 4 to 6*

- **3 cups water, more if needed**
- **1 teaspoon kosher salt**
- **1 cup stone-ground grits**
- **½ cup buttermilk**
- **½ cup heavy cream, more if needed**
- **1 tablespoon unsalted butter**
- **1 tablespoon pecan oil**

In a heavy-bottomed medium stockpot, bring the water with the salt to a boil. Add the grits and stir, bringing them back to a boil.

As the grits begin to thicken, add the buttermilk and cream, then reduce the heat to a simmer, stirring occasionally for 45 minutes until the grits are creamy and thick. If the grits start to thicken quickly, add equal parts water and cream. Stir in the butter and oil just before serving.

# I'M GOING TO THE STORE

An ordinary errand fills more than just the pantry.

BY ALISON MILLER

IN A PHOTO TAKEN ON MARCH 16, 2020, I stand in the kitchen like a hunter showing off the pelt of a slain beast. Instead of a prized kill, I hold a receipt that stretches from my hips to six inches above my head. I'd ventured into the dangerous world and returned with food to sustain my family for weeks.

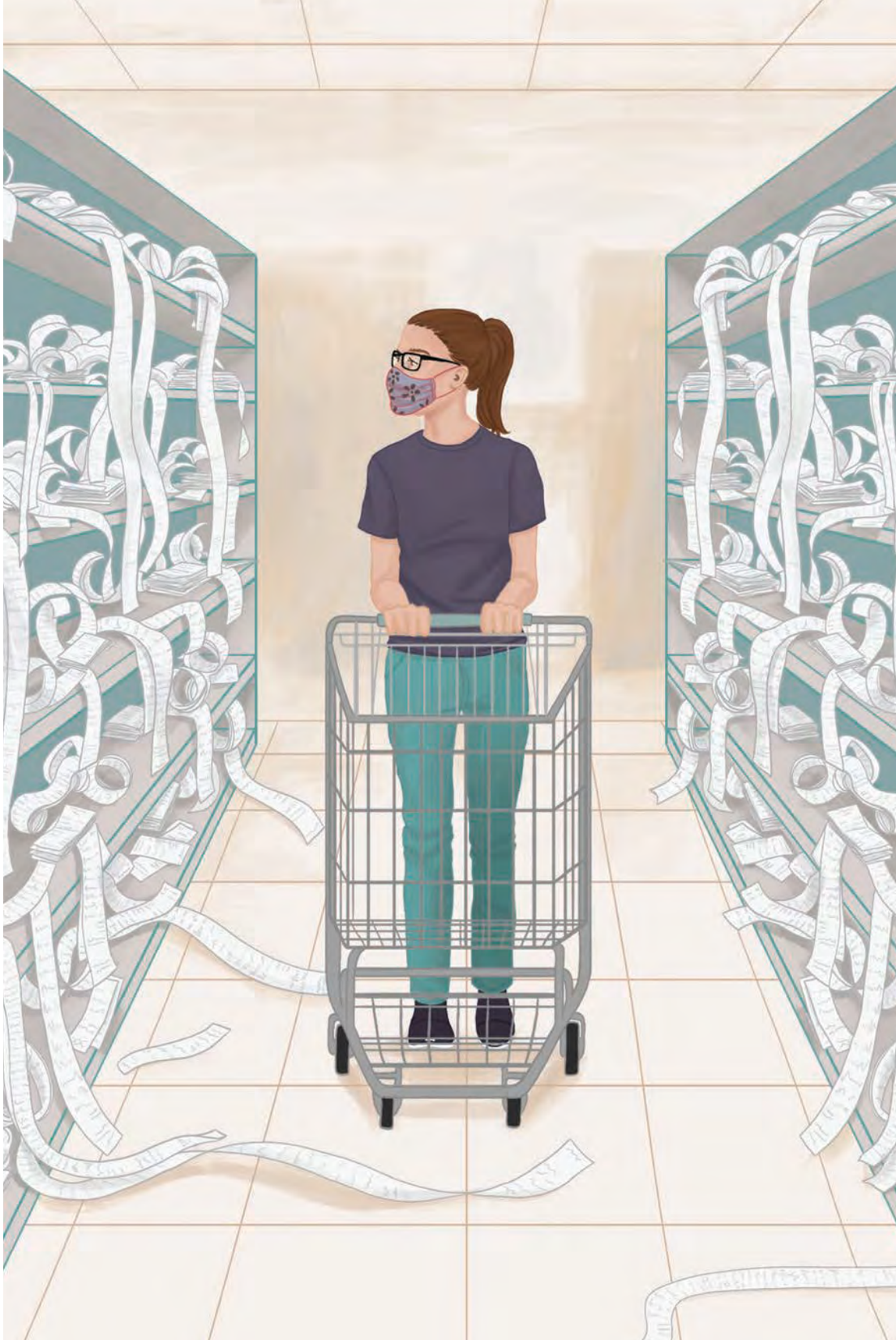
We'd left for vacation ten days earlier, when coronavirus was a nascent threat, foreboding, but far away. By the time we returned, our six-year-old daughter's elementary school had shut its doors and the mayor had declared a state of emergency.

Back then, cities were virus hellscapes. Driving fifty miles from Athens, Georgia, where we live, to Hartwell, Georgia, where I grew up, felt necessary. *The stores in my small hometown will be less crowded,* I reasoned. I tied the straps of a flower-print mask behind my head and heaped a cart with glass jars of spaghetti sauce, boxes of pasta, and bags of frozen vegetables.

Summer came and went, then fall. Two adults, a first-grader, and a puppy, my family lived in a house with a square footage that seemed to cinch every day. Instead of writing, I crafted butterflies out of coffee filters and helped Avery solve math problems on a school-issued iPad.

The grocery store became a place of responsible refuge, a thrill with a respectable motive: We had to eat. It combined the selfless act of providing for the family with the pleasure of getting the hell away from them. Everything was in its place here: tidy shelves and buffed floors, free of scattered toys and construction-paper clippings, an antidote to the chaos and uncertainty of home.

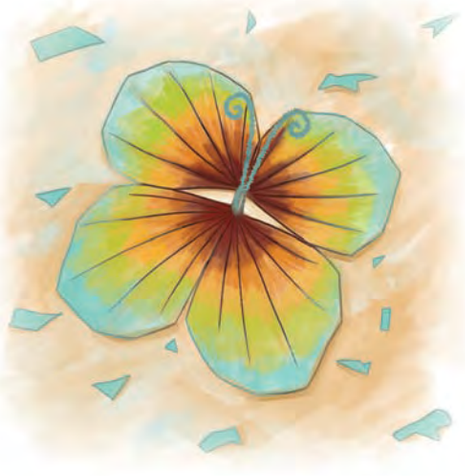
Instead of shopping every two weeks, I began to go two or three times a week. Rather than driving fifty miles, I drove one mile to Bell's Food Store on



Illustrations by Lindsey Bailey

Hawthorne Avenue in Athens. Some days I walked the aisles at 7 A.M., basking in the muffled hellos of masked employees and shoppers and searching for connection in the eyes of strangers. I'd return home with ingredients for a pot of soup, log our daughter in to virtual school, and have dinner finished by 9 A.M. I felt powerful. I might not read or write a word, but I'd cooked a meal, and that was something. Maybe we'd get through this.

The sound of a metal cart clattering over vinyl tile cues a reel of supermarket memories. The grocery store was my mom's place, and she too visited often. I remember trailing her as she learned her way around the Bell's store in Hartwell when we moved there thirty years ago. I see myself as a tow-headed girl piling



honey-wheat bread and Oscar Mayer bologna on the conveyor belt in this place we now called home.

Every family vacation started with a trip to the grocery store. On pilgrimages to my parents' homeland of western New York, that meant a double-cart odyssey to Wegmans, land of loganberry juice, Kummelweck rolls, and deli hot dogs strung together by their casing. On special occasions, my brother and I followed her through the labyrinth of Harry's Farmers Market in Marietta, Georgia, staring into the stunned eyeballs of red snapper while she ordered shrimp from a white-aproned employee. In the parking lot, we watched her maneuver the haul into an ice-filled cooler in the back of our minivan for the two-hour drive home.

The morning of her first chemo treatment, she and I left the house with a bucket and a pack of Depends. A nurse had told her how sick she might get, and she wanted to be ready. She sat in a vinyl recliner, warm blanket on her lap, toxic chemicals streaming through her veins, and pulled a pen from her purse to add to the shopping list for Thanksgiving dinner the next day. After, we drove to Whole Foods in Decatur. She'd never pass up the opportunity to hit a good grocery store.

Perhaps she knew something that I have only recently come to understand. Faced with the insurmountable, buying groceries is achievable. It's progress—a simple problem solved in a complicated world where singular effort often feels futile.

A few months after she died in 2014, my dad drove to Texas to visit (we lived in Dallas; my brother had settled in Austin). He brought Mom's purse, a small shoulder bag she'd assembled on her basement sewing machine. Our job was to clean it out. We were in the action chapter of grieving then: The satisfaction of checking a task from a list shrouded a deeper, yet-untapped grief. We gathered around the granite island in my brother's apartment kitchen and my dad pulled credit cards from her wallet. Jason noted them on a yellow legal pad, cut them up, and threw them away.

My dad pulled out a folded stack of receipts and handed them to me. "We



After my mother's first chemo treatment, we drove to Whole Foods. She'd never pass up the opportunity to hit a good grocery store.


don't need these anymore, right?" I flipped through. Walmart, Ingles. "Nope." I added them to the trash pile.

Seven years later, I have no regrets about filling garbage bags with clothes she hadn't worn in years, but *goddamn*, I wish I had those receipts. I'd hold them in my hands like treasure maps and retrace her steps. I'd ponder what meals she had in mind when she plucked a can of diced tomatoes from the shelf or dropped onions into a plastic bag. Did she consider a bunch of celery and wonder if she'd cook her way through it before she died? Or did the forward motion of this quotidian task steer her toward hope?

My mom's two sisters took turns caring for her in those last few weeks. By the time I flew home, she was sleeping in a hospital bed and moving around the house in a wheelchair that someone had to push. I recently asked my aunt Terri what she remembered about that last trip to the grocery store. "I remember her pleasure in doing that simple task," she wrote in a text message, "and her probably finding some peace in still being a player in that arena where she had always been."

Two weeks after she died, my husband, Dan; Avery, then six months old; and I flew back to Georgia for a visit. My parents' fridge and pantry, once sites of abundance, sat sparse and untended. I woke up early the next morning and drove to Ingles. I had barely put the car in park before my forehead hit the steering wheel and I dissolved into a gasping cry. "I don't know how I'm going to do this," I texted my aunts.

Eventually the tears stopped. I inspected my face in the visor mirror, slung my purse over my shoulder, and walked toward the sliding glass doors. I grabbed hold of a shopping cart and, like her, like so many others before us, started pushing.

On a recent early morning trip to Bell's, I turned the corner from frozen foods and pointed my cart toward the checkout lanes. The woman standing behind the prepared foods counter looked up. "How you doing, baby?" she asked. "Good," I said. It was true.

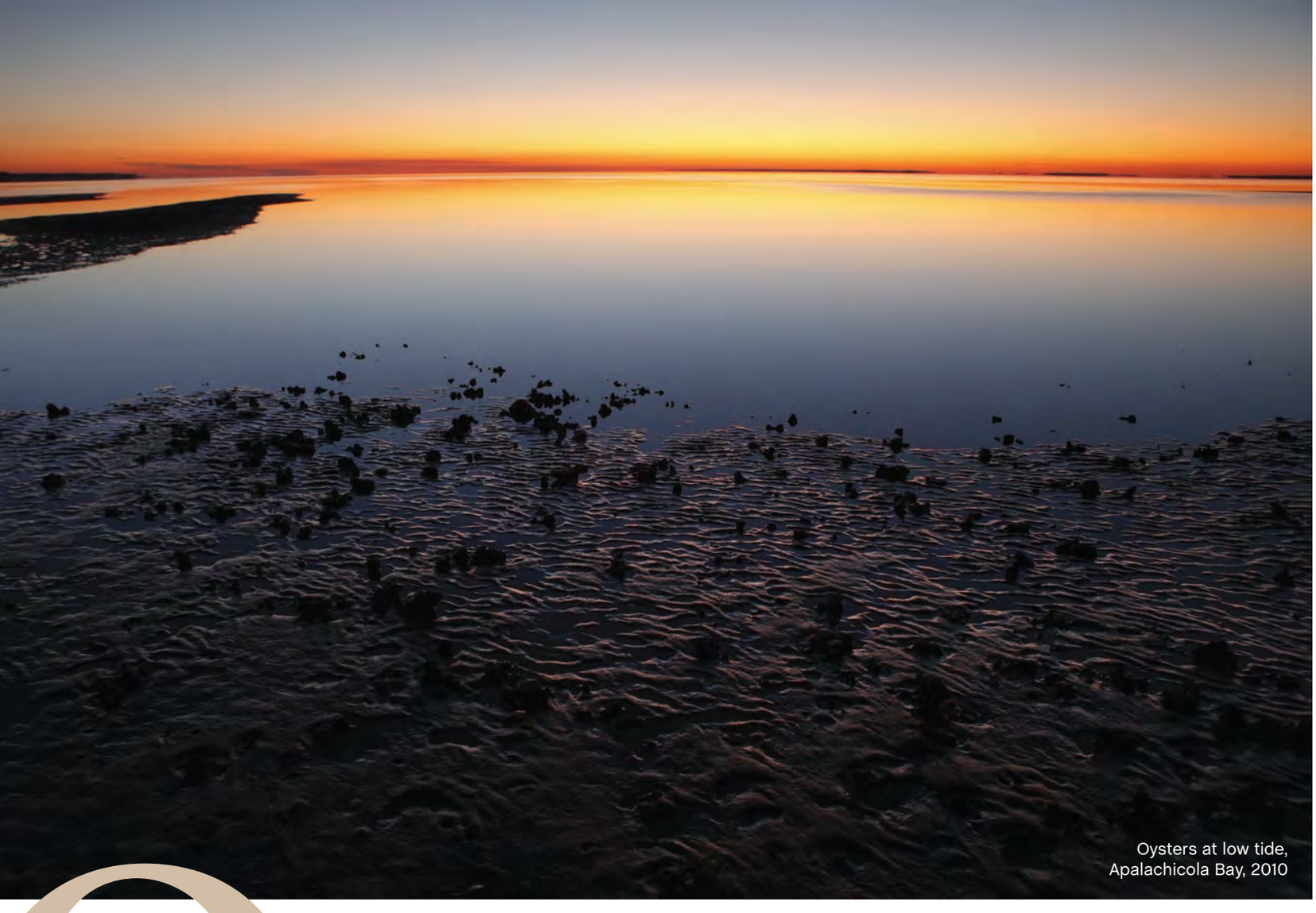
*Alison Miller is a freelance writer in Athens, Georgia, and a second-year student of the Narrative Nonfiction MFA program at the University of Georgia.*

# The Lost Pearl

*by* JANISSE RAY

*Photographs by*
JOHN B. SPOHRER, JR.


*What happened to the Apalachicola oyster?*



Oysters at low tide, Apalachicola Bay, 2010

# On the Panhandle coast

## of Florida, the so-called "Forgotten Coast"

because it's the least developed in the state, an enormous sedimentary river meets the ocean. This watershed starts in the Blue Ridge foothills as the Chattahoochee and flows south, dividing Georgia and Alabama. It is joined by the Flint at Lake Seminole, pours through the Woodruff Dam, and emerges as the Apalachicola. Wide and full of life, micro and macro, the Apalachicola River gathers the wildness of Apalachicola National Forest and rolls past the seaside village that bears its name to deliver nutrients to the bay.

Apalachicola Bay is legendary. Rich with life, the bay is almost perfectly shielded from the vagaries of the ocean by two barrier islands, St. George and St. Vincent, which form a cupped and protective hand. For millennia this estuary was one of the most productive in the northern hemisphere.

I was twenty when I first saw the place. I had enrolled at Florida State University, hoping to study with a poet whose work I admired. The coast was Tallahassee's playground, and I spent long, blistering days belly-surfing in the waves. The Panhandle coast was famous for its blindingly white beaches, its history of land preservation, and, more than anything, its mother lode of oysters.

I remember a dozen glistening oysters nestled in their half shells, delivered to our table after a day at the beach, while I relaxed with friends in the salty air. I watched gulls circle, listened to fish crows, felt the evening sun on my forearms. The waiter brought lemons and crackers, horseradish and hot sauce. But the best oysters need nothing. The first taste had marshes in it. Then came the earthy, fleshy, volcanic madcap, followed by an aftertaste of the salt sea.

WE FORGET SOMETIMES THAT FOOD comes from places. We forget the places. Wild food, healthy food, comes from functional places, from fertile fields and fertile forests and fertile oceans. Back then, all those years ago, I saw the crazy fecundity of Apalachicola Bay with my own eyes.

One clear Saturday twenty-five years ago, my friend, the oceanographer Jeff Chanton, took his family and mine motorboating out to a long crust of sandbar extending from a barrier island. On the bay side, hundreds of willets, more than I'd ever seen or imagined to see, clustered so tightly that they appeared to be a single flat animal that occasionally stretched one of its thousand wings.

Across shallows where tidewater flowed, a marbled godwit furiously probed wet sand. Two or three ruddy turnstones scooted about, their shoulders gleaming like polished mahogany. A jury of black skimmers rose from the thicket of willets and flew to an exposure of sand farther east. The white laughing gulls were crowned with onyx, their wings gray stoles edged in black. Brown pelicans, wingspans as wide as dinner tables, banked above the rookery. Every ounce of energy turned to procreation. It was as if the world were pregnant, and this was her womb.

The sandbar was a big nest, and through the binoculars I was lodged inside it. Although I could not see them, I knew that eggs would be tucked here and there across the spit, and those eggs would hold the birds of the next generation.

My friends eased away from the rookery and landed far down the beach. As we walked, treasures lined the strand—purple corals and sunburnt sponges and parts of horseshoe crabs and black rectangular cases of manta eggs. Fresh green seaweed, perfect seashells, a sea turtle carapace.

Apalachicola Bay then was full of life—not just shorebirds and sea turtles but a limitless abundance of flounder, mullet, grouper, blue crab, shrimp, scallop, oyster. We'd buy oysters by the burlap bag and roast them, standing around autumn fires, oyster knives in hand. I thought that as long as the world persisted, as long as humans could hollow a boat, they could cross the flat pan of the bay and feast on life.

I was wrong about that.

IN THE SUMMER OF 2020, THE OYSTER fishery closed in Apalachicola Bay. By December, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) had banned all harvesting for at least five years. Something was happening to the oyster—nobody knew exactly what, although lots of people had ideas.

To understand how shattering the announcement was, scrape a kayak into Indian Pass when the bay is peaceful and paddle a quarter mile across to St. Vincent. Step onto the beach, pull your boat out of reach of high tide, and start walking. You'll come to long swales of ancient oyster shells—middens—discarded by native communities as many as four thousand years ago.

These St. Vincent middens "provide some of the oldest evidence of human presence in Florida's coastal zone," wrote Susan Cerulean, an important conservation voice, in her book *Coming to Pass*.

I THOUGHT THAT AS LONG AS THE WORLD PERSISTED, AS LONG AS HUMANS COULD HOLLOW A BOAT, *they could cross the flat pan of the bay and feast on life.*

For thousands of years, the oyster has sated people along the Gulf of Mexico. Apalachicola Bay is impressive not only for the sheer number of oysters it has produced but also for their tremendous sizes. Researchers at the University of South Florida (USF) studying middens have found oyster shells seven inches long. Before the closure of the bay, three to four inches was norm. Stephen Hesterberg, who led the USF study, said that native people enjoyed "a range of oyster sizes that no longer exists today." If we can figure out why oyster size declined, he says, that information might help us understand why oyster populations declined.

Florida began tracking oyster harvests in the 1980s. Harvests varied year to year, but on average oyster fishers sold about 1.8 million pounds of meat annually. The

An oysterman takes a break from tonging in Apalachicola Bay, 2009.

year 2012 busted all records—oyster fishers in Apalachicola Bay raked up and sold over 3 million pounds of oyster meat, valued at almost 9 million dollars.

After that, the numbers plunged, every year lower, all the way to 18,000 pounds, total, in 2020. In eight years, Apalachicola Bay had gone from 3 million to 18,000 pounds of oyster meat.

What in the world could have happened? Was it the Deepwater Horizon oil spill? Was it agricultural pollutants? Was Georgia taking too much of the Apalachicola River's fresh water, skewing a delicate balance?

BROOKS WADE SAW THE RISE AND fall. Wade is a happy guy in his sixties, strong of body and blue of eye. Born in Ocala, Wade moved to the coast as a young man, first working blue crabs, then managing a seafood business, and finally running an oyster house.

Oysters grow from muddy substrate in rough sheets. Their shells are so sharp they will cut feet and hands like razors. To harvest them, oyster fishers ease their boats into shallow waters, then stand on their decks wielding long tongs with metal claws on the ends, using the tongs to break off, rake up, and lift oysters into their boats. As a tonger dumps, a sorter picks out oysters of edible size and throws everything else overboard.

"The oyster industry was *The Industry*," Wade told me. "At one point I had over forty oystermen plus twenty sorters working for me. The boats would come in at 2 or 3 P.M. and we'd work until midnight, washing, sorting, and grading." In the 1990s, Wade was shipping 1,000 pounds a day to markets in New York, San Francisco, Las Vegas, Honolulu.

"I saw the fishery explode," he said. "I remember sitting in the oyster house looking out a big window. You just can't imagine how many oyster boats were out there—fifty boats, three or four tied together in one place."

There were times—new or full moons—when the oyster fishers benefitted from radical negative tides. Instead of 300 bags a day, they would harvest 1,000. "For a few years it was breathtaking," Wade said. Fishers called that Hogging Weather. Those days are gone.

Apalachicola Bay wasn't just "a place filled with oysters from one end to the other," as Wade put it. The place was producing some of the best-loved oysters in the world, oysters with the flavor of clear blue ocean, not mud.

"Why did they taste so good?" I asked.

"Magic," Wade laughed. "No, what makes an oyster tasty is a combination of salinity and fresh water." (To get technical, that's fifteen to twenty-eight parts per thousand of salt.) The salinity in the bay, especially in places like Indian Pass and Cat Point, was perfect, a balance that had lasted thousands of years. "The thing about wild fisheries," said Wade, "if humans are not damaging them, they come and go." But they always bounce back.

Not now.

"So you saw an entire fishery die," I said to him.

"Not only did I see a fishery die, I saw an estuary die," he said. "There is no guarantee that it will ever come back. They can spend millions of dollars and it may not come back."

An estuary dies when it cannot rebound from human assaults, including overfishing. Runoff laden with agricultural pollutants, chemicals, or silt can lower oxygen levels, damage water quality, and

kill marine life, sometimes creating entire "dead zones."

IF APALACHICOLA BAY HAS A CHANCE of recovery, we have to understand what caused the collapse. For that, I turned to Sandra Brooke, lead scientist with the Apalachicola Bay System Initiative. Her job is to understand why a $9-million industry is gone and how we can get it back. Because of the COVID pandemic, I spoke with Brooke by phone, a photograph of her on my screen—she's slim, with sun-lightened hair.

Brooke grew up in England, in a cold house with only one fireplace. She told herself that when she was grown, she was going to live somewhere warm. That's how she became a marine biologist, a profession that plunged her into the failing tropical coral reefs and into deepwater canyons at the bottom of the failing ocean. Now she's on the Gulf Coast of Florida trying to save another beleaguered sea creature. She's serious and a bit stressed, which I find understandable.

As with most big, causal questions, the answer to this one—*What happened?*—is complicated, Brooke explained. All those boats on the bay were part of the problem. "If the system's in trouble and you continue harvesting, it's going to contribute," she said.

Part of the problem, too, was that oyster harvesting removes more than the edible commodity from the system. It also removes substrate. "Oysters are strange creatures. They make their own habitat," said Brooke. "With most things, you can overfish them for a little while and then they will bounce back. But with the oysters, you are removing their habitat as well." Habitat means oyster shells, which often end up in a dumpster out the back door of a restaurant in some far-flung place like Atlanta or Anchorage.

In years past, a line item in the Florida budget stipulated that fish houses return a certain amount of shell to the bay in order to maintain reef height. This replaced some of the oyster home. "Oysters don't live in mud," Brooke said. "They have to reach food in the water column." By the late 1990s, however, lawmakers had struck the reshelling program from the budget.

Then came a significant drought in 2007 and 2008. Freshwater flow into the bay from the river decreased. With higher concentrations of salt, marine predators—most notably the oyster drill, but also queen conchs and marine fishes—moved in. "You're getting to the point now that the population is getting hit hard by a number of different things," said Brooke, "and it's not being allowed to recover."

In 2012, another drought brought more predators, lots of overharvesting, and no reshelling. "At that point, Mother Nature said, 'I can't do this anymore,' and the system crashed," Brooke said.

Brooke returned to the problem of overharvesting. "Given that the fishermen are obeying the laws, and overharvesting happens," she said, "the responsibility must lie with management." FWC, which manages the fishery, traditionally responded to declining numbers by lowering the bag limit—how much a single fisher could take. It did not limit permits, nor did it set an annual quota. It had no statewide management plan for oysters, such as there is for the scallop and for many other seafoods. "The situation we have now is a culmination of management not doing as well as it should and a series of environmental and human-induced impacts," said Brooke.

IF APALACHICOLA BAY HAS A CHANCE OF RECOVERY, WE HAVE TO UNDERSTAND
***what caused the collapse.***

Loggerhead hatchlings make their way to the water, St. George Island, 2006.

Still, closure was controversial. At one point, however, Brooke said, oyster fishers were down to one bag a day. "That's not a living," she said. "That's beer money." Brooke has a soft spot in her heart for the people who have earned a livelihood for generations fishing the waters of Apalachicola Bay. "People depend on this resource," she said. "It's a rather traumatic situation at the moment in Franklin County."

I'd been speaking with Brooke for almost an hour and she hadn't mentioned the so-called Water Wars, a conflict in which Florida charged Georgia and Alabama with taking too much of the Apalachicola River's fresh water and choking the famed Apalachicola Oyster. Now, unable to find settlement, the case is pending before the United States Supreme Court. I have been one of the believers in that theory, so I'm curious why Brooke hasn't mentioned it. "Florida hasn't shown that by increasing water flow the oyster population problem would be solved," she said.

I WANTED TO GET CLEAR ON THE Water Wars, so I found an expert. Steve Leitman is a curly-haired and athletic hydrologist at Florida State who has been

A female grackle eats cold-stunned oysters in Apalachicola Bay, 2014.

deeply involved in the three-state conflict for decades. Recently he math-modeled the flow of the river using seventy-five years of climate data.

What's true, Leitman told me, is that the perfect salinity for oysters is determined by freshwater flow. What is not correct is that Atlanta's water needs and south Georgia agriculture (increased use of irrigation) caused the collapse. "Georgia could do better," he said. "But blaming Georgia for what the climate did is nonsense."

Leitman explained that the problem with river flow is not so much a change of volume as of distribution. "We have floodier floods and droughtier droughts," he said. This extremism is the very definition of climate change: more intense, less predictable, less steady weather patterns.

Yes, to fix the oyster problem in Apalachicola Bay, Leitman said, flow will have to be addressed. "But we'll have to address more than flow," Leitman said. "Since the 2012 drought there have been good flow years and the oysters haven't come back. On the flip side, the bay has had worse salinity and did not crash."

Leitman stressed the difference between causation and correlation. "What *pushed the oyster fishery over the edge* is not necessarily what *caused* the collapse," he said, choosing his words carefully to emphasize the distinction. This is correlation: much-needed fresh water from the Chattahoochee River upstream was being siphoned off as a beautiful fishery teetered on the edge. Causation was overharvest, inadequate regulations, and, more than anything, climate change.

COLETTE PICHON BATTLE, EXECUTIVE director of the Gulf Coast Center for Law and Policy, was quick to point this out. "The closing of the Apalachicola Bay to oystering due to drought is yet another impact of climate change on the Gulf South," she wrote me. "Climate change shifts rainfall patterns, causing droughts as well as floods in our region. It's time for all Gulf South elected officials to have the courage to acknowledge and address the impacts the global climate crisis has on our local communities and our local economies."

If I am understanding the scientists correctly, reopening the Apalachicola Bay oystery, even in a diminished form, will require better management and more regulations, and even when those are addressed there will be the enormous, global issue of the climate. Fixing that one is going to take all of us—the quicker, the better.

The specter of climate change, with weather becoming more extreme, swings like a pendulum in a hurricane wind. In Appalachicola Bay, it has, in less than one human lifetime, destroyed a place-based food. Apalachicola oysters turned a meal into a celebration. They fed people for thousands of years. They seemed endless, indestructible.

As I reported this story, I realized I was angry. I still am. What I'm angry about is that the world is changing for the worse and I can do nothing about it, or almost nothing. I'm angry that it's never coming back, not like it was.

I've always hated extinction. Every cog of life we lose depauperizes our planet and disrupts relationships species have with each other and with their environments, interactions that have been evolving for time immemorial. Our wild world is a glorious one. We humans have been lucky to witness it. The more of it we lose, the more of ourselves we lose.

NOW, A CONVERSATION ABOUT Apalachicola oysters takes on a note of nostalgia, even sorrow. "There's a smell of oysters in an oyster sack like no other smell," Wade said. "It's mesmerizing to me and to others who live that life." I've heard other fishers, who are on the water every day, talk of their work in these endearing, even seductive, terms. Hard as the work is, there is something primal and satisfying and irreplaceable about it.

I asked Wade how he prepared oysters when he took some home. He paused. "When all the seafood is in your lap, you're stepping on oysters, every night you're sampling them...I don't know that I ever took oysters home."

In the oyster house, then, how did he eat them?

"It's an insult to put anything on a good oyster," he said. "You cut the muscle and let her slide."

Every winter for the last ten years, Wade has returned to Indian Pass from his home in South Carolina. After he sets up his little pull-behind camper, the first thing he does is buy a bushel sack of local oysters. He stands there awhile in the Florida sunshine, listening to laughing

***Our wild world is a glorious one.***

**WE HUMANS HAVE BEEN LUCKY TO WITNESS IT. THE MORE OF IT WE LOSE, THE MORE OF OURSELVES WE LOSE.**

gulls and wind in wax myrtle, breathing in smells that touch something deep inside him. Then he grabs a bag of ice and dumps it over the oysters. He will sit in his camp chair, oyster knife in hand, and eat his fill, looking across the restless pass at the fringed outline of St. Vincent Island.

Not this year. Those oysters didn't happen this year. They won't happen next year or the next.

LOOKING TO THE SCIENTISTS FOR a possibility of hope, I asked Sandra Brooke, "Do you think we're going to get this fishery back?"

She hedged. She talked of the need to establish sanctuaries and about farmed oysters, an up-and-coming industry. "When I first arrived, there was no aquaculture. That has exploded."

"But the fishery?"

"I think closure is going to be absolutely invaluable," she said.

"Can we get it back?"

Brooke was quiet for some seconds. I could almost hear her working a tiny scale in her mind, weighing what to say. She wanted desperately to be hopeful. Finally she said, "If we can provide habitat, if we can put it in the right place and the right configuration, and if there are still larvae in the system, and we leave it alone, and enforcement does their job, and we get a management plan in place, yes, I think there will be a fishery in the future."

For the burgeoning, spilling, outpouring of life to be possible, long food chains have to be intact. The best food security for humans is stewardship of wild places and implementation of the transformations we are called to make to slow and reverse the climate crisis.

May it happen.

The oystermen's commute, Apalachicola Bay, 2007

INDIAN PASS IS UNBELIEVABLY calm. I steady my kayak and step in, then wiggle off the sandy boat ramp. I feel some fear. The fear is not of the unpredictable swallowing capacity of the sea, licking its million white tongues in sprays of suffocating mist and foam, pulling my boat west toward the vast paradigm of never. No, the fear is something else, fear of the world *not* changing, of us having buried ourselves too deeply, irreversibly, in a dream that no longer works.

It's a quick scoot over to the wild island of St. Vincent. On the point a terrific garden of birds blooms from the dull sand. Pelicans rest with black skimmers, an occasional willet, the five oystercatchers I saw yesterday from a distance. Ahead, sea oats hold dunes in place. Beyond the dunes, diminished by intense hurricanes during the thirty years I've known this place, the pine forest spreads lacy fans against a strangely clouded sky. I say "strange" because the cirri have piled up for days as if promising rain, but it hasn't come. Two monarchs bob and circle each other, facing the wide, lonesome, steel-blue sea on their long voyage to Mexico.

The day is chilly, so gray the distinctions between sand, sea, and sky are vague. Out in Apalachicola Bay a pod of dolphins feed. Their triangular black fins appear like tiny sails and disappear, cutting through waves. As I walk the empty beach, a sandpiper scurries along in front of me then takes to air, squawking as it banks away.

The place looks plenteous. But I have the perspective of years, and I see poverty—fewer shorebirds, fewer shells on the strand, smaller pods of dolphins. I see a system hit so hard by so many assaults that it staggers under the blows. Something Sandra Brooke said comes to mind. She told me that she has been going out with oyster fishers, and they are finding spat—larvae that have attached to a surface—and also juvenile oysters.

And where there is spat, there is hope.

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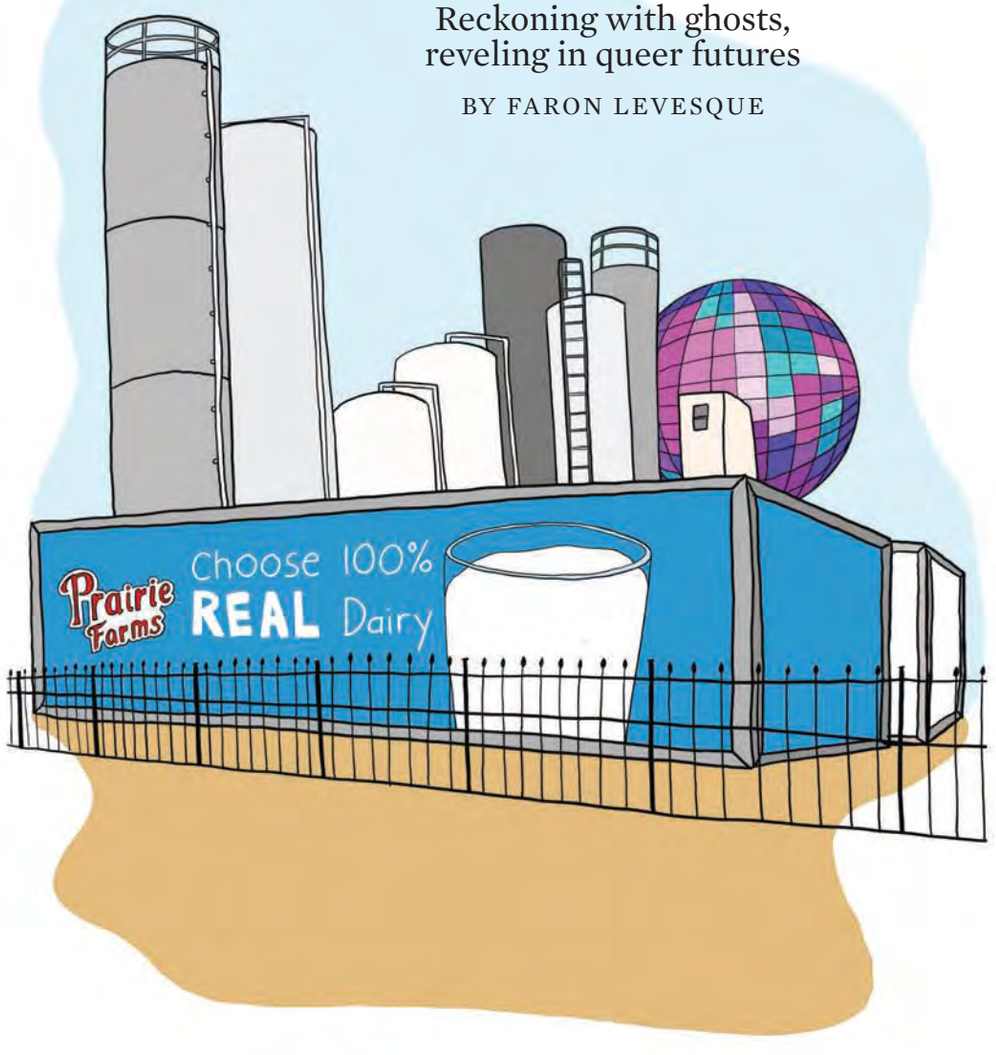
# IT'S SCARY BEHIND THE DAIRY

## Reckoning with ghosts, reveling in queer futures

BY FARON LEVESQUE




Illustrations by Iris Gottlieb

BIG BUTCH DOLLY IS PACKED AND stacked with boxes of collards and radishes, chard and lettuce, eggs and honey. Driving in the shadows of FedEx cargo jets coming in hot, our farm kitchen van is just a blip in the larger distribution multiverse of Memphis, Tennessee. I'm making my way north on Airways Boulevard, where smells beckon and potholes try to suck us into the sandy underbelly of this old, queer river city.

The saccharine storm fronts billowing from a squat factory under the overpass hit me first. KELLOGG'S—in big, blood-red, glowing cursive—marks the building where workers produce Froot Loops, Raisin Bran, and Rice Krispies. They work an endless loop of long shifts.

The swampy heat rising up and over the bluffs carries a wallop of garbage. Every day is trash day. The stench comes wafting from the army of trucks, once called wiener barrels for their cylindrical compactors, as they move fast and furious through the sprawl of Memphis. Some of the trucks have the iconic I AM A MAN slogan emblazoned on the sides in commemoration of the historic protest for higher wages and better working conditions spurred by the gruesome deaths of sanitation workers Echol Cole and Robert Walker in 1968.

The mobilization of Black sanitation workers in the wake of Cole and Walker's deaths drew the support of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME)—the largest trade union of public employees in the United States—and of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who was assassinated in Memphis when he came to support the striking workers. P.J. Ciampa, a former steelworker from Pittsburgh who served as AFSCME field staff director during the 1968 strike, said: "They are going to have to come up with some bread and some decency, or this city is going to smell awhile." I first saw the fiery organizer's words enlarged on a wall panel of the Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike exhibit at the National Civil Rights Museum. Since then, the message has stayed with me: Rot can be revolutionary, too.

I think of the Memphis seal stamped on those city-issued trash cans today. The emblem, designed in 1962, is a soft-cornered square with four symbols: a gear to represent manufacturing, an oak leaf to symbolize the lumber industry, a cotton boll that nods to the city's position in the worldwide cotton market, and a steamboat to pay homage to the Mississippi River economy. In that seal, I see a story of racial capitalism. Cedric Robinson's term describes the extraction of economic and social value from non-white labor. The exploitation of forced labor by white

> When I pass Turner Dairy, I see the apparation of Backstreet, the gay club that once stood behind it.

enslavers, and later of underpaid labor by subsequent generations, laid the foundation for refining, disposal, shipping, and manufacturing, the industries that still dominate Memphis.

Windows down, moving low and slow, I breathe in the plumy ghosts of smoked meats as they dance above one of Memphis' most sacred churches: Payne's Bar-B-Q. Flora Payne and her mother-in-law took control of what would become Payne's in 1984. The pig chars for hours in a recessed pit, the signature slaw is neon yellow, and that good sauce bubbles on the back stove all day. The hot stuff is in the soap bottle. "Thirty-six

years, you know; you can perfect something in thirty-six years.... I pray over this food. Bless it," she said in an oral history. I say a little prayer, too, for the eternal loves and labors of Ms. Flora Payne, and keep rolling. The cloud of steady-burning hickory and oak coals lingers.

Froot Loops, hot trash, and charred pig: That's the bouquet that slaps back most days when I head out from our small hilltop farm by the airport, once the territory of the Chickasaw Nation.

The perfumes of Memphis are highly subjective. They give texture to the food work I do and to the stories I tell. Tennessee Williams said, "Memory is seated predominantly in the heart." It's in the nose, too.

I'M IN MIDTOWN NOW. Nothing is open quite yet. Prep cooks work behind the scenes, chopping veg, making roux and rent. I turn onto Madison Avenue. Grilled onions for days. Restaurants, head shops, and convenience stores appear one after another. Developers have pounced on the once-cheap real estate. Condos are going up everywhere. Graffiti scrawled on the exposed wood planks reads EAT THE RICH; MEMPHIS IS MORE THAN NEW MONEY; and EW.

At 2040 Madison Ave., an industrial milk plant casts a shadow on neighborhood standbys like Kwik Chek (get the muffaletta) and the Blue Monkey (you can *smoke* in there still!). Idling big rigs puff fumes through tailpipes as workers fill tanks to the brim.

When I pass Turner Dairy, I see the apparition of the warehouse that once stood behind it, a 20,000-square-foot gay megaplex dance drag emporium called Backstreet.

Before COVID brought everyday life to a halt, I stopped at Huey's in Midtown, a stone's throw from the dairy, for a burger and a visit with veteran bartender Jordan Theiry.

After exchanging *hayyyyyyyyys*, we talked about which queer spots were still hanging on in Memphis. We came up with two full-time nightspots: Dru's Place and The Pumping Station. Each is legendary in its own way. Yet neither commands what Backstreet once did.

Then, with all the pomp and snarl of a proper camp queen, Jordan trilled, "It's scarrrrryy behind the dairyyyyyy!" We doubled over with guffaws, remembering the power of a place long gone. During Backstreet's heyday, from 1995–2010, this was queer code speak: a little bit of theater and a little bit of truth; a reclaiming of homophobic hostilities.

There's nothing like the feeling of walking into a big, ole, bass-pounding gay bar. All us Alices tumbling down the rabbit hole as we entered the club through a long, low-ceilinged corridor. Revelers gathered in a huge dance area called the Coliseum. The waft of sweat, cigs, and booze was atmospheric. We always went directly to the drag zone.

Froot Loops, hot trash, and charred pig: That's the bouquet that slaps back most days when I head out from our small hilltop farm by the airport. The perfumes of Memphis give texture to the food work I do and to the stories I tell.


The space was intimate, with cabaret tables clustered around the stage.

Multiple bars scattered throughout the expanse offered Jell-o shots, cheap beers, and set-ups. It was a bring-your-own-liquor situation—a total Memphis thing and a holdover from the days when laws limited the sale of hard liquor in pockets of the South. It's when you tell the bartender, "This is my bottle of booze and I'm grateful for being able to bring it in. I'll be buying cups of ice filled with Coke and tipping you, so don't even worry."

The Memphis Police Department's Organized Crime Unit (OCU) temporarily shuttered Backstreet in 2009, signaling that end times for the gay mecca were near. In an early morning raid, undercover agents cited illicit sex acts in dark side rooms, underage drinking, drug sales, and gambling as the proof in their pudding.

State-sanctioned police violence against queer folx and the places they make is an entrenched practice. LGBTQ+ folx working and playing in queer spaces are well-versed in the challenges of staying open, staying alive. The Stonewall Inn and Compton Cafeteria are the two famous examples from a list that is stunning in its length and geographical breadth. At Dru's Place, a large mural is

When I think about Backstreet, when I mourn the erasure of queer spaces in the South, I'm grasping for a usable past. Where do the landscapes of queer liberation and revolt begin and end? Always within the history of struggle.

decorated with the names of over 110 long-gone gay bars of Memphis written out in colorful chalk.

I'm from here. But when I was eighteen, I moved away to begin college. I sought something I thought I would never be able to find in a landscape of neoconservative ascension. I saw bigots all over the damn place, clinging to Lost Cause mythologies and seemingly bottomless plantation coffers.

My people were a ragtag family of Mississippi Hill Country barrel racers and sharecroppers, Acadian barbers, and Georgia goat farmers. They chose different routes to get educated. "Whatsamatta U" is my dad's self-proclaimed alma mater. From peacocks to ployes to stories of migration and experiences of deep country poverty, they gave me all the riches of the poor, I would later realize.

It would take years of queer exile, living in cities small and large (Northampton, Massachusetts; San Francisco; Madison, Wisconsin) for me to be able to understand the place Memphis holds in the Queer South, to have the clarity of vision to see the abundance of queer life here, its limits and possibilities.

Backstreet was fraught. Safe spaces are always subjective. Built environments are never free and clear of the hierarchies of race, class, gender, and ability. Writer Nico Lang recently referred to diverse sites of queer pleasure and revelry as "imperfect possibility models." That sounds right.

Even as a first-generation college graduate, the vast privileges of whiteness lent me access and mobility. But I learned my best lessons studying a hidden curriculum in alternative academies like Backstreet. I gained more through comrades and chosen kin, excess and lust, revolutionary imagination and queer revolt, and the sacred work of storytelling and holding space for memory.

When I think about Backstreet, when I mourn the erasure of queer spaces in the South, I'm grasping for a usable past. Where do the landscapes of queer liberation and revolt begin and end? Always within the history of struggle.

The violence is still very real. As of March 2021, the murder of Trans people was up 266% on a yearly basis, and widespread anti-LGBTQ legislation was gaining momentum in Mississippi and Tennessee. The need for safe spaces remains.

Backstreet grew out of imperfect visions of accessible, queer social spaces. It wasn't a utopia, nor was it sustainable. It was felled, digested, and decomposed by the city. But again, rot can be revolutionary, too. Compost makes for fertile soil. New worlds emerge from ruins.

What can community care look like now? As condos, pipelines, and Covid come for the most vulnerable communities in this city—shifting landscapes, razing neighborhoods, taking lives—what will remain? How will we remember? What worlds will we build on these living ruins? And, perhaps most importantly, how will strategies of collective, direct action offer people-powered care and relief? Writer and scholar Zandria Robinson has lyrically captured the essence of radical hospitality, the politics of these possibilities. "It is one thing to be welcomed," explained Robinson, "it is another thing to be seen. And still another to be rigorously cared for and fed." I carry these words with me on the guest-check pad that I keep in the front pocket of my overalls.

By seizing the means of food and health, disinherited and dispossessed folx are reckoning with this city's ghosts and reveling in its queer futures. Within the intimate currents of people and place, struggle and soil, appetites and desire, pleasure and pain here in Memphis, I see a politics of care that's all about mutual aid, harm reduction, and political education. In this space, I'll be excited to introduce *Gravy* readers—all y'all—to some of the fine people growing food and showing our city's soil some tenderness, provisioning free food programs and ministries, assembling survival kits and homes for unhoused Black and Brown Trans communities, and cooking up queer joy and love in our beloved river city.

Big Butch Dolly struggles to top the hill after our long day of deliveries. I pull into the farm. The chickens are quiet, but FedEx still roars overhead. As I wash the totes we use to move our precious cargo, the hose water sprays back on my warm cheeks and arms. I lose myself in the process, then an urgency takes over. I clutch my guest check pad with wet hands. I've seen so many gorgeous people, heard so many things, and breathed this city in deep. I get a little frenzied as I try to write it all down. Hot trash, charred pig, Froot Loops. Keywords to trigger my memory. I'm so scared of forgetting.

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*Faron Levesque is a historian, writer, and host based in Memphis, their hometown. You can find more of their work in the forthcoming collection* Acquired Tastes: Stories About the Modern Origins of Food *(MIT Press), from which parts of this essay were adapted.*

# A CERTAIN TYPE OF SOUTHERNER

## How I came to feel at home in the world—and in Kentucky

BY CHANDRA RAM

GROWING UP IN LEXINGTON, KENTUCKY, Sunday mornings were for catechism and Mass. Sometimes after church, my mother would pause our wood-paneled station wagon in front of Wheeler's Pharmacy and send me in to pick up a gallon of milk. Wheeler's boasted a classic soda fountain with crinkle fries and grilled cheese sandwiches fried in butter. One afternoon, as I plunked a jug of two percent and a dollar bill on the counter, the woman at the register leaned over, glasses sliding down her nose, to take in this brown-skinned, black-haired girl in pigtails and church clothes.

"Honey...what *are* you?"

The question didn't offend me the way it would now; from a young age I had to explain myself to strangers. I told them my father was Indian and my mother was Irish. They had immigrated to America a few years before I was born. Yes, we visited our family overseas, and yes, it sure was different there. But, no, we didn't worship cows.

Her point was unmistakable: I did not belong in the place I called home. Back then, we mostly thought of race as a binary thing; being some shade between black and white meant people had questions. *Just taking an interest*, they might say. *Y'all are just so exotic!* Even benign interrogations sent the message that my family was inherently other. Not the family on an outing to the zoo, but the pandas in the enclosure.

We fumbled our way through moments like those, crafting our American lives from scratch. My father bought us tickets to cheer on the UK Wildcats and told work colleagues to call him Mike. My brothers joined Cub Scouts, painting Pinewood Derby cars and eating Happy Meals after pack meetings. I pirouetted and cartwheeled through ballet and gymnastics, got used to the agonizing pause

Illustrations by Thumy Phan

as teachers struggled to pronounce my name, and took experimental bites of my friends' pimento cheese sandwiches. We thanked the neighbor who stopped by with a chess pie, tasting it later to figure out what exactly was in it.

Food was both our path and our stumbling block. My mother shook her head at weak American coffee and the processed cheese masquerading as cheddar. But she let me eat peanut butter and jelly every day for lunch. Raised on meat and potatoes boiled to mush, she became a talented South Indian cook, making her own yogurt and frying pooris that puffed in hot oil in defiance of the soft white bread on our neighbors' tables.

Noreen Mary Teresa Ram has the spiciest palate of anyone I've ever known. I later wondered if some lack of seasoning in her childhood made her twice as hungry for flavor as an adult. Once, when we were visiting my paternal grandparents at their home in Visakhapatnam, I saw her eat a good-sized chunk of raw Thai bird chile, a move that dazzled my aunties. Who was this red-haired, blue-eyed woman who carried idli steamers in her suitcase home to America?

On Sunday afternoons in Kentucky, she fried potatoes and onions with Kashmiri chile powder. The aromas floated through the house. As the onions melted into chunks of buttery potatoes in the pan, an undercurrent of chiles tied the flavors together. I resented the smell of Indian spices that loitered for hours; they reminded me of our outsider status. During sleepovers, I made sure my friends got nowhere near our Indian spice cupboard that stank of asafoetida. But no matter how conflicted I felt about my heritage, I could always get behind a plate of potato-onion fry.

Out in the world, I craved the unexotic. I wanted a life that didn't smell like anything at all. I watched how other people spoke and moved and pretended to fit in, taking notes like an anthropologist. I aspired to be a certain type of Southerner. I cringe now when I think about how much effort I put into learning Confederate history and reading *Gone with the Wind*, blithely glossing over the racism that would have put me in servants' quarters, not in hoop skirts in the Tara dining room.

I studied my classmates' blond feathered and permed hair with envy. Even the mirror reflected my imposter syndrome. At fourteen, I saved up my allowance to buy skin bleaching cream advertised in the back of a magazine, believing that with enough effort, I could become a real American. (As soon as my skin began to tingle and flush, I lost my nerve and scraped it off my face.)

When we visited India, I clumsily draped a shawl around my shalwar kameez, stuck a bindi on my forehead, and strolled to the candy emporium with my cousins to buy bottles of Thums Up, the spicy cola we drank through flimsy paper straws that dissolved into the bottle within minutes. I smiled blankly at my cousins' reenactments of Bollywood movies I'd never seen and at anyone who spoke Telugu to me. Few did. Instead, people stared at me. Something about my person screamed foreigner.

Never quite white or brown enough, I spent years trying on both identities for size, like silk dresses that promise to transform you into someone sophisticated and worldly. We third-culture kids were raised by parents who, with the best intentions, wanted us to retain our heritage and also fit in with other Americans. My parents went along with eighth-grade dances and trendy jeans. They thought that I was okay in this middle place; they would have wept if they'd found me trying to bleach my olive skin white. They were offering me both worlds; I just couldn't see either.

When my father died in 1987, I lost my connection to one of those worlds. Standing at his funeral, half-listening to inscrutable Sanskrit prayers that were more sound than words, I said goodbye to a parent. And a cultural ambassador. I could no longer ask him why it was important to eat laddu and other sweets at the temple. Or how to pronounce a word in Telugu. I gave up on fitting in, committing myself to a sad cultural bankruptcy.

When I left home a couple of years later to live in New York, Milan, and London before landing in Chicago, my goal was to create a new life for myself. My parents had moved half a world away from their homes, and encouraged me to go anywhere and everywhere, too. When I roamed, people still asked where I was from. But their questions were friendly conversation starters, shorthand to get to know me. I began to stumble less in my answers. Walking through Istanbul, a city that spans the border between Europe and Asia, I felt at home among people who carved out their own identities within that mix. Sitting in my flat in London talking with South African, Irish, and Swedish friends who embraced a mix of cultures as a matter of course, I realized how closed-minded it was of me to assign a single identity to India, America, or myself. As I moved from place to place, I unclenched my shoulders and let go of the need to define myself so narrowly.

OCCASIONALLY, I STILL think about that day at Wheeler's. I'm reminded of it every time Vice President Kamala Harris is compelled to insert into a speech that she was born in California. She does it to tame people who question how a Black and Indian woman can also claim to be American. It reminds me that not all questions about identity are innocent.


I've learned that everyone yearns to belong. When I ask my mother about moving to America, she tells me how out of place she felt, learning to drive on the opposite side of the road. How she had to explain to people that yes, she was Irish, but, no, she had never eaten corned beef and cabbage.

My younger brother and I tease our "American" spouses when we cook saag paneer and dosa with them. We know that when they married us, they welcomed those flavors and our culture into their lives. Now, on Sundays, my nieces and nephews dial in from Nairobi, Charleston, and Atlanta for our weekly Zoom sessions, and I marvel at how assured they are in the world. They give me hope. Born in Baltimore, my nephew Kieran lived in Kathmandu, Mumbai, and Nairobi before moving to back America. He tells me he didn't feel the need to code-switch like I did as a child; he has a stronger sense of self than I did at his age. He lives in Atlanta now and knows the world is his home.

I, TOO, REALIZE the world is my home. When I walk outside the airport after landing in New Delhi, the night air carries its own masala. There's a hint of toasted cumin and cardamom, which smells like the bottled-up promises of a tourism ad spritzed into the air. That smell is tempered by the chemical tang of cleaning solution, the sweet spoilage of rotting bananas, and the acrid smoke of buffalo dung burned for fuel. This smell of so much humanity hits me in my blood, a drumbeat of familiarity that tells me this place is mine.

Driving to Lexington from Chicago, I roll down my window when we cross the Ohio River into Kentucky. The air I inhale is sweet with bluegrass and honeysuckle. Here, the sharpness of manure comes from cows and pampered race horses. When I get to my mom's house, I take my bags up to my childhood bedroom and sink into being home. I don't fret about things like I used to. I'm more at peace. My only worry is, *Will she make that potato-onion fry tomorrow?*

*Chandra Ram is the editor of* Plate *magazine and the author of* The Complete Indian Instant Pot Cookbook.

# THE FAMILY FARM

## Behind a romanticized ideal, there is struggle—and love.

BY MARGARET ANN SNOW

The author with her children on the banks of the Black Warrior River

AWAKE SINCE BEFORE DAWN, WHEN the sky was still black and the birds had yet to consider their morning song, I had spent hours in this parking lot lined with white pop-up tents, transforming it into a farmers' market. Between describing the various heirloom tomatoes that lined my table and answering customers' questions with as much enthusiasm as I could, I didn't notice exhaustion creep in until the noon bell rang. Now the lot was emptying and as I folded our tent, a group of farmers began to gather around me.

One of the newest and youngest turned to me and said, "You and David are making it work. Balancing farm and family. It gives me hope."

I worked up half a smile while considering the best response.

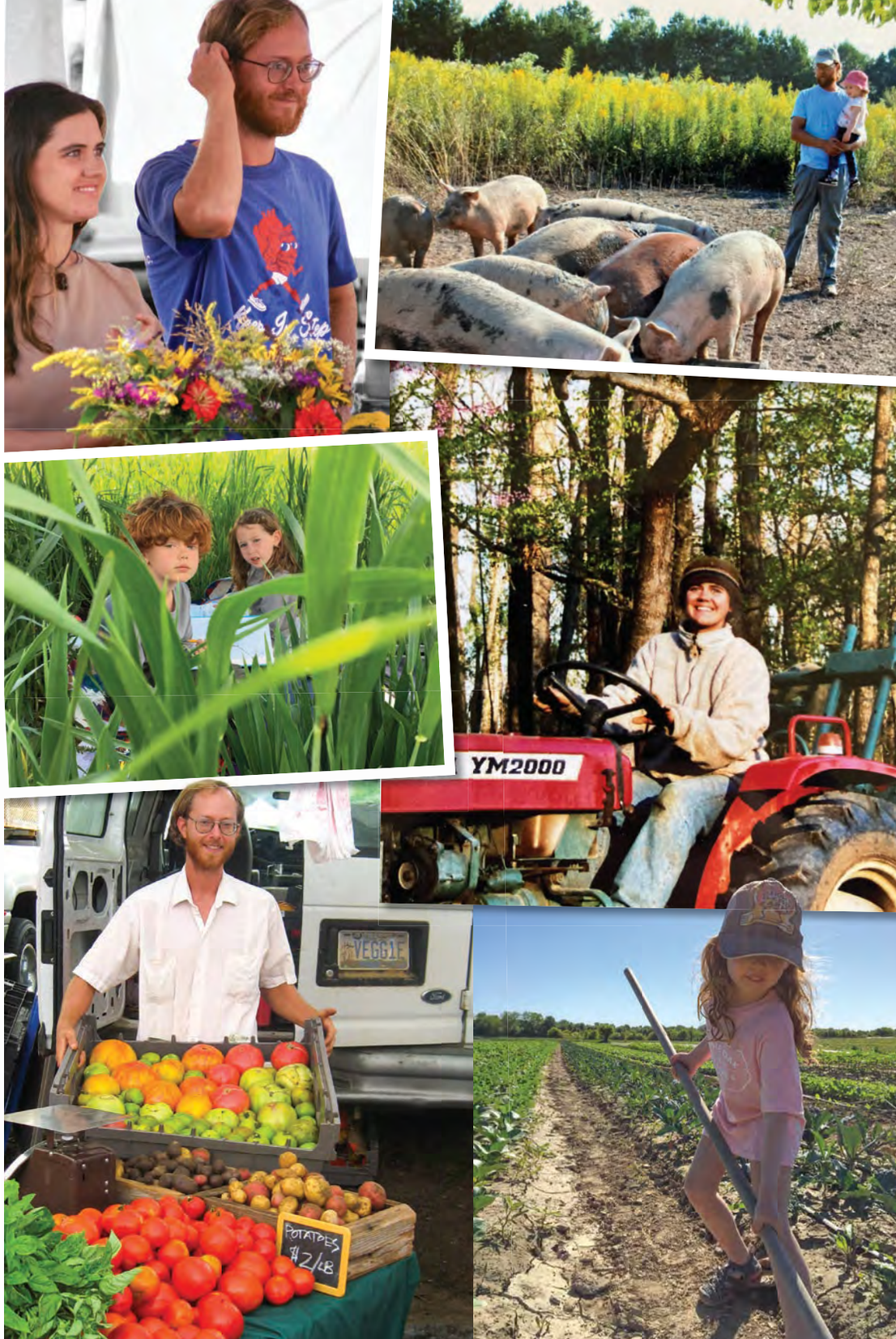
I could tell him that we began our farm as adventurous twenty-four-year-olds, when we had the freedom to fail. I could tell him how I never considered a life with children, not sure that we would even have them. Until we did.

I think about an album of pictures sitting on a shelf at home. The first pages are of our early farming years, youthful faces full of pride at what we had accomplished. In one picture, David loads a crate into our van stacked almost to the ceiling with crates of perfect tomatoes. He pauses to hold one out for the camera, the proudest smile I have ever seen upon his face. In another, I stand behind a cart full of our first watermelon harvest. One hand perched on a melon at the top of the mountain, a look of delighted disbelief in my eyes. These pictures take me back to the time before our children were born, when David and I would ride out to the garden in our two-door pickup as the sun was rising and not return home until it set behind the trees on the opposite bank of the river. Home was for showering, eating, and sleeping. We lived among our rows of beets and arugula, in the newly turned soil, and inside our greenhouse.

When I was eight months pregnant with our first child, we realized there was nowhere to put a car seat in our pickup, so we bought a sedan. We would no longer be able to ride to the farm together since the nursery wouldn't open until 8 A.M. and one of us would need to be at the farm by six. The idea of our child being the first one dropped off and the last one picked up was also hard to accept. Our expenses began to grow: childcare, diapers, carriers, and clothes. In photos, we change from bright-eyed young entrepreneurs growing our business with each head of lettuce to bleary-eyed new parents. Our babies morph into toddlers and then into dirt-covered kids, proud smiles on their faces as they hold up freshly dug carrots for the camera.

Would it help if I told this optimistic young farmer standing next to me at the close of a long market morning how, when our children were born, we began to weigh the time it took to raise them well alongside the time it took to run a farm and business? Only able to work a fraction of the hours we had previously put in, we compensated with inexperienced staff. High payroll followed, and the farm began to lose money. We hadn't realized how our unpaid hours subsidized the farm.

Should I tell him about the dinner-table discussions David and I have after our children have eaten their few bites and wandered off to play? He and I sit,




CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Margaret Ann and David Snow at one of their first farmers' markets; David and their daughter checking on the pigs; The author on the couple's first tractor; The Snows' daughter helps to cultivate; David with tomatoes in the farm's early days; The Snows' children hide in a cover crop.

PREVIOUS: Andrea K. Mabry; THIS PAGE: courtesy of Margaret Ann Snow

The author's daughter holds a snail shell she found.

Andrea K. Mabry

surrounded by half-eaten plates of homemade pizza, cups of milk, and balled-up napkins. The weight of our worry is heavy. We try to unload it by talking about staffing, expenses, our income, our to-do lists. We talk about whether we can afford a new delivery truck, or if we should keep sinking money into the old one. About how the deer are still getting through the electric fence to eat the strawberries. We wonder how we can create time to think through necessary, large-scale changes when each day poses multiple small hurdles such as these. Do I tell this farmer how these conversations end, not with closure, but when we are too tired to talk about it any longer and need to put our children to bed? Would it help to be truthful about the annual financial reckoning we face? The rewards of our job never show up on the profit and loss report.

I recently read an article about farmers making the life- and identity-altering decision to shut down their operations because, once they had children, their situations were no longer financially sustainable. The piece followed two couples trying to keep their businesses afloat, juggling the needs of their children with the needs of their farms. It sounded familiar. I felt their pain, and also their relief at finally moving on and letting go of a dream they realized was already gone. I don't want to be a statistic, yet another family farm that failed. I want to be a good mother and also a good farmer. I don't want to believe that it is impossible to do both well. I want to ensure the existence of local food, raised by people who care for their community and for their land. I don't want this food to only be available to those with the income and resources to access it.

Maybe I should tell my young colleague about the successful farmers I know who chose not to have children, suffering over the decision. I want to say to him, "Don't let the farm make the decision." But is that good advice?

Like this young man, some farmers are able to live on the land that they farm. For various reasons, mainly that we do not own the land we farm, we are not. In some ways, living on the farm would be simpler. No more thirty-minute commutes one way, sometimes just to open or close a greenhouse. In other ways, such as our children's education, it would be more difficult. If we home-schooled our children, one of us would be their caregiver and teacher, not a full-time farmer. The other parent's workload

I want to be a good mother and also a good farmer. I don't want to believe that it is impossible to do both well.

would double, or we would have to hire to make up the difference. One parent in the field, one in the home—this seems to have been the model of the past. Was it a successful one? The fact that most of those children grew up to leave the farm far behind signals it might not have been.

Should I turn to the young farmer's wife and partner and mention how the schooling and household chores historically have fallen to women? If our children's education were left in my calloused hands, reading and math would be replaced with entomology and plant pathology in the field.

Yet I want farming to be a choice for them. A farmer must be compelled to farm. There is no other way for it to work.

Farming is a multigenerational endeavor,

one that cannot be fulfilled in a single lifetime—though it can be lost in one. Do I tell him that many family farms only become profitable in the second, or even third, generation? Like us, he is a first-generation farmer, setting the foundation for the future.

I'd rather tell him how seeing the farm through our children's eyes has renewed our own excitement in it, as well as in the natural world. Our son and daughter play in the soil while I weed, sometimes coming over to help. They'll show me a snail shell they have found or a sculpture they have created from mud, sticks, and grass. If I've kept my head to the ground for too long and lose sight of them, I'll call out and they will pop up like prairie dogs in different sections of the garden. It would bring me more happiness to talk about how familiar they are with the land, how they always know exactly where they are and cannot get lost. Watching us do the physical work of farming creates a familiarity with it that can only be had in this way. They are learning about cover crops, beneficial versus harmful insects, weeds, and plant families. If they get hungry, they pluck a leaf of kale, a sun-warmed strawberry, a handful of pea tendrils, or a cherry tomato. They are familiar with which native plants are edible and which are not, sharing that information with their friends, who then teach their parents. This is the story of their childhood.

If the children get hungry in the garden, they pluck a sun-warmed strawberry, a handful of pea tendrils, or a cherry tomato.

My own youthful experience with farming is much different. David and I worked for six short months on an organic farm in Washington state on a post-college whim before deciding we were ready to start our own farm. We learned the hard way, our education ongoing. Our children have been learning to farm through osmosis since the day they were born. They tell people it is okay that they are covered in dirt because they are farmers.

What if I only give my farmer friend this view, where a mere glance at our son or daughter makes my heart swell with so much love that it begins to ache? That wouldn't be the whole story, but it is what I want to say. If I were to be honest, to detail the difficulties, would it influence his decision one way or the other? Would he feel, like others, that he must choose: family or farm?

IT HAS BEEN a long day, and I begin to think about the drive back to the farm, dropping off the employee who has helped me all morning, unloading the unsold produce, cleaning coolers, putting all the wooden display boxes and scales back into their designated places. I won't return home until after 3 P.M., almost eleven hours after I pulled out of our driveway this morning. David will be exhausted from parenting alone all day, but our children will still be full of energy and need dinner and baths and books read to them.

LEFT AND RIGHT: Andrea K. Mabry

The Snow family checks on their lettuces, October 2020.
OPPOSITE PAGE: The author's daughter enjoys a fennel frond.

"I don't know that we are making it all work, necessarily." It is the only response I can give him in this moment.

"Sure, you are!" he responds enthusiastically.

That is all he wants: to believe that it is possible.

All I have to offer him is a genuine smile and a willingness to keep trying.

I'll keep for myself the memory from a couple of nights ago, when my daughter woke me, calling "Mommy!" I snuggled in bed beside her, small and sweet and warm under her blankets.

"Can I tell you about my dream?" she asked.

"Sure, but then we need to go back to sleep."

"You and I were working on the farm and then we kissed."

I pulled her in to me as close as possible, took in a deep breath of her, and whispered, "That's a good dream."

---

*Margaret Ann Snow is the owner, along with her husband David, of Snow's Bend Farm, just outside her hometown of Tuscaloosa, Alabama. She has been farming organically for over eighteen years.*

*The Fish Painting* (2014), Oil on canvas, 70 x 60 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

LAST COURSE

# The Fish Painting

JOHN ALEXANDER'S PAINTING CAREER SPANS A HALF-century. Though he has lived most of his adult life in New York, the Beaumont, Texas, native often turns to the flora and fauna of the Gulf Coast for inspiration. Visit southernfoodways.org to read an interview with Alexander as told to SFA founding director John T. Edge, part of our Future of the South series underwritten by Cathead Distillery.


SFA GRAVY

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