



GRAVY



Character isn't made by machine.



Every bottle of Maker's Mark® Bourbon is still hand-dipped in our signature red wax. Learn more at makersmark.com.

WE MAKE OUR BOURBON CAREFULLY. PLEASE ENJOY IT THAT WAY. Maker's Mark® Bourbon Whisky, 45% Alc./Vol. ©2019 Maker's Mark Distillery, Inc. Loretto, KY

Maker's
Mark®



GRAVY

ISSUE NO. 73 • FALL 2019



FEATURES

28
RECIPES IN BLACK AND WHITE
Michael Graff

40
A COMET CALLED RAJI
Mayukh Sen

50
CIRCLING HOME TO ARKANSAS
Jay Jennings

2 Editor's Note
Sara Camp Milam

4 Featured Contributors

7 Director's Cut
John T. Edge

10 Good Ol' Chico
Gustavo Arellano

14 Rooted in Place
Rosalind Bentley

24 Wait and See
Jenna Mason

60 Busted Sooks, Rank Peelers, and White-Belly Jimmies
Bernard L. Herman

68 What's For Dinner?
Priya Krishna

73 Beholden
Shane Mitchell

76 Last Course
Jai Williams

ON THE COVER:
Illustration by Ran Zheng

LOOK HOMEWARD

Can you see it differently?

BY SARA CAMP MILAM

AS THIS ISSUE OF *GRAVY* GOES TO press, I am seven months pregnant. Any sense of comfort I normally feel in my own body is fading quickly. If I recall correctly, things are going to get worse before they get better. Where I'd really like to be, much of the time, is at home on my couch. There, I can recline to an angle that's almost comfortable, with only my anxiety and my heartburn to keep me company.

When I go on maternity leave, my fantasy will become a reality of sorts. I'll be physically at home a lot. To keep a healthy outlook, I will sometimes need to get away. Or I will need to find a new way to see familiar surroundings. I relate to these lessons in the most literal sense, for I learned them during my first maternity leave three years ago. Editing this issue, I recognized that such shifts in place and perspective are also the kinds of tricks that the best writers use.

Working with these writers, I thought often of home and the various ideas we

develop about the places we call home. You'll read about the homes we are born into, the homes we adopt, and the ones we leave and return to. Food and cooking are often central to home-making. But not always. Back in June at our Bentonville Field Trip, *Oxford American* senior editor Jay Jennings gave a beautiful talk about his native state. Quoting his friend and colleague Charles Portis, Jennings described himself as an Arkansan who had "failed to achieve escape velocity." He left Little Rock after high school, only to move back decades later. Jay shared the deep personal and professional

Willie J. Allen Jr.



The Griffin Heights neighborhood in Tallahassee, Florida

satisfaction he's found since returning to his hometown. That talk, which we've adapted for this issue, is not a food piece. And I'm not sorry. It's exactly the kind of thoughtful, incisive writing I admire and want to share with you, *Gravy* reader.

Elsewhere in this issue, Rosalind Bentley returns to the Tallahassee neighborhood where she grew up. As the expansion of Florida State University drives gentrification, Bentley asks, what will be lost when the old neighbors are gone? Priya Krishna and Mayukh Sen both explore the Indian diaspora in the American South. Their pieces celebrate the

home cooks and restaurant chefs who have forged new homes in this region. (Speaking of home, both Krishna and Sen quote Vish Bhatt, the chef of my favorite hometown restaurant, Snackbar.)

Here in *Gravy*, I hope you find opportunities to consider your home, neighborhood, region, or nation in different lights. Maybe, reflecting on the homes you've claimed, you'll see an image that you had nearly forgotten, or smell a long-lost dish on the stove. Maybe you'll step out of your kitchen to consider life from your neighbor's perspective. As you read, I wish you a comfortable couch and no heartburn. 🐦

FEATURED CONTRIBUTORS



BERNARD L. HERMAN

Bernard L. Herman teaches Southern Studies and folklore at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he explores the material cultures of everyday life—how people furnish, inhabit, communicate, and understand the worlds of things. His current work, *A South You Never Ate*, brings together over one hundred interviews on the foodways of Virginia’s Eastern Shore as part of a larger project on humanities-based sustainable economic development. He wishes he had written Daniel Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year*, which blurs history, parable, and memoir in its evocative account of the great plague that swept London in 1665.



PRIYA KRISHNA

Priya Krishna regularly contributes to the *New York Times*, *Bon Appétit*, and other publications on subjects from cultlike Instant Pot fandom to Texas grocery chains and her ongoing attachment, as an adult, to the classic PB&J. She is the author of the cookbook *Indian-ish: Recipes and Antics from a Modern American Family*, a tribute to her mom’s hybrid Indian American cooking. Before pursuing a freelance career, she worked for *Lucky Peach* magazine. The last book she wishes she had written is *Emergency Contact*, by Mary H.K. Choi, about a young love that blooms awkwardly over a string of text messages.

JAY JENNINGS

Jay Jennings is senior editor at the *Oxford American* and a freelance writer. He is the author of *Carry the Rock: Race, Football and the Soul of an American City*, about Little Rock Central High School fifty years after the integration crisis, and the editor of *Escape Velocity: A Charles Portis Miscellany*. He lives in Little Rock with his wife, Abby, and his daughter, Marlo, who accompanied him to SFA’s recent Summer Field Trip in Bentonville. He wishes he’d written Lydia Peelle’s short story “Nashville,” a terrifically funny portrayal of Nashville as a rollicking bachelorette party destination.



Top: Gus Gustafson; Bottom: Arshia Khan

MAYUKH SEN

Mayukh Sen is a New York–based writer whose work has appeared in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. He won a 2018 James Beard Award for his *Food52* piece on soul food restaurateur Princess Pamela and was nominated this year for his Poetry Foundation piece on Maya Angelou’s food writing. He teaches writing at New York University and is currently writing a book of narrative nonfiction, to be published by Norton, on the immigrant women who shaped food in America. He wishes he’d written Parul Sehgal’s sharp and masterful *New York Times* profile of English actress turned politician Glenda Jackson.



Top: Edlyn D’Souza; Bottom: Jason Favreau



◀ **OCTOBER 12, 2019**
JOHN EGERTON PRIZE AT THE SOUTHERN FESTIVAL OF BOOKS
Nashville, TN



▲ **OCTOBER 24-26, 2019**
22ND SOUTHERN FOODWAYS SYMPOSIUM
Work Songs,
Po-Boys, Soup
Bean Theater
Oxford, MS

▶ **DECEMBER 9, 2019**
SFA CELEBRATES JENNI HARRIS
Five Generations of
White Oak Pastures
Atlanta History Center, Atlanta, GA



MARCH 28, 2020
SFA Spring Symposium
The Future of the Restaurant

HAVEN • BIRMINGHAM, AL

OCTOBER 8-10, 2020
23RD SOUTHERN FOODWAYS SYMPOSIUM
The Future of the South
Oxford, MS

For more information, visit
southernfoodways.org

STAKING THE BIG TENT

The SFA at twenty

BY JOHN T. EDGE





THIS PAGE: Mississippi farmer and catfish processor Ed Scott fried catfish at the 1999 Symposium.
PREVIOUS PAGE: North Carolina pitmaster Ed Mitchell (left, in overalls) cooked at the 2002 Symposium.

THE SFA, WHICH MARKED ITS twentieth anniversary as an organization this summer, has changed.

What began when fifty founders lent their names to an idea, coalesced at our annual fall symposium, and gained purpose with our documentary and storytelling initiatives, has evolved and adapted and morphed and expanded to do more than our founders conceived. Much of that change has been purposeful: A healthy organization rejects stasis, especially an organization that aims to document, study, and explore this vibrant region.

When people outside the organization talk about the SFA, they often use the term preserve. SFA once used that term, too. Our initial mission was to “celebrate, preserve, promote, and nurture the traditional and developing diverse food culture of the American South.” Our aim then was to preserve the stories of people whose narratives had long been overlooked, misconstrued, or maligned.

About ten years back, we took a harder look at what we do and what we intend. SFA recognized that, at our best, we tell

new stories about this dynamic place and its varied people. Instead of codifying what’s old, we curate what’s new. We document our region’s ongoing evolution. In the telling, we aim to change the South, for the better. With that in mind, we rejected the term preserve and the finality it implied.

We aimed to explain ourselves better. Yes, we preserve stories, but we don’t do that work to halt change or progress. The SFA doesn’t believe that the South was made at some point in the past. And we don’t believe that, without intercession, the South might be unmade at some point in the future. Culture is not a product. It’s a process, just as the South is a process.

Because we take that stance, our current work, focused on the contemporary South, is often messy and sometimes cantankerous. When you work in the present, nothing comes off as settled, almost all is debatable, just about everything is in motion.

When we focused our energy on looking back, SFA work was tidier. Even when we looked back on contentious moments, like the Civil Rights Movement era, temporal distance between then and now made our work a tool of affirmation. *That was then*, we said of the Civil Rights Movement era and the Jim Crow era before. *Wrongs have made right*, we suggested. *Those problems are no longer our problems*, we implied.

This April, while enjoying a breakfast of grits and eggs with a friend and SFA donor in suburban New Orleans, I recognized that our current choice to set SFA work in the contemporary South

does not always sit well with our membership. *What you publish in Gravy now seems more aggressive*, he said, in a kind tone that told me he was truly searching for an answer. *It feels more threatening*, I heard. Those are not the words I would have chosen, but I didn’t argue.

Our perspective has indeed changed, I told him. That’s because the SFA has more recently focused its attentions on the challenges the South confronts today. That’s harder, I said. It can be threatening to some, and emboldening to others. We never aim to drive members away. We will always aim to tell honest and unflinching stories of this place we call home.

SFA’s shift in coverage, from past to present, unsettled him. Taking into

Culture is not a product. It’s a process, just as the South is a process.

account the rapid cultural shifts and entrenched political tensions of today, when the whole of the nation feels unsettled, I can’t imagine another way to be.

Back in June, I joined another donor for breakfast, this time in Atlanta. Over pan-fried eggs and sausage and peaches, he talked about what he saw and felt when he attended his first SFA symposium, more than a decade ago. That event had reminded him of the interracial softball team he played on back in the 1970s. He didn’t reference *The Bad News Bears*, but he implied that sort of spirit.

Sponsored by a soul food restaurant and bar, the team included Joogie, the

owner, who wore a pistol on his hip while running the juke (but not while running the bases.) *SFA events used to feel like that*, he told me, in a generous tone that reminded me of that New Orleans conversation. In the telling, he implied that the SFA of today doesn’t feel that same way.

I’ve been puzzling this through, trying to make sense of why he feels that way. My friend had responded, I think, to what SFA intended when we began our work back in July of 1999. Our audiences have never met our own standards for inclusion, I told him. Our reach has never matched our intent to represent our region. Nostalgia for beginnings can often cloud realities.

In truth, our events are more integrated than they have ever been. And thanks to media products including our *Gravy* podcast, our audience is younger and more diverse, too. This is a start. An earnest intent. But we can do more and will do more to stake a big tent under which all may gather.

It is the responsibility of our staff to manage realities and perceptions, and to leverage all toward a better South. My challenge today is to help run an organization that makes room for both of these friends, and these different challenges to SFA work, while acknowledging that the SFA has changed and will continue to change and will always work to be the sort of organization through which many people of many backgrounds with many different perspectives may find common purpose and make community.

I love this work. Today, our work matters more than ever. Our work shows more potential than ever. And so we return to that work, fixed on helping the South realize its potential. Onward Cornbread Nation. 🍷

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

WISDOM OF THE WHITE SAUCE

A Virginia Mexican condiment
speaks to place and change

BY GUSTAVO ARELLANO

THE ALERTS STARTED ON TWITTER. Then Instagram and Facebook. Texts and emails from friends, family, and readers soon followed. *Did you know Mexican food in Virginia comes with white sauce?!*

They all shared the same article: A May 3, 2019 piece in *The Virginian-Pilot* headlined “The story of white sauce, Virginia’s unique contribution to Mexican American cuisine.”

In the piece, reporter Matthew Korfhage dug into the history of a free condiment offered at sit-down Mexican restaurants in the Old Dominion, specifically around the southeastern part of the state. White sauce is exactly what it sounds like: a dip originally derived from a ranch-esque salad dressing, “fuming with garlic and spice,” as Korfhage put it. Restaurants from Virginia Beach to Newport News have served it for nearly forty years.

I read his piece, simultaneously gnashing my teeth and applauding.

I have documented Mexican foodways

in the South for nearly a decade, and I’ve written a book about Mexican food in the United States. Yet I had never heard of Virginia’s Mexican white sauce.

Right before Korfhage’s piece ran, I had guest-edited a huge *Eater* package on Mexican food in the United States. One of my contributions was a map of Mexican American regional dishes: Tater tot tacos in the Pacific Northwest. Walking tacos (a bag of Fritos or tortilla chips dressed with cheese and beans) in the Midwest. Sugared carnitas around the Mountain West and Utah. Mississippi Delta hot tamales and ACP—the queso-smothered arroz con pollo of the South. I would have included Virginia-Mex white sauce, if only I had known.

No reporter likes to get beat on a story. But a gracious one compliments his competition, so I called Korfhage. After we hung up, I found myself searching flights to Norfolk and fantasizing about a salsa blanca tasting tour. The conversation

Photos by Oriana Koren





reminded me that the South is changing in ways that we don't often appreciate, or even notice.

And while what I just wrote is a truism, sometimes you need something as seemingly mundane as white sauce to truly get it.

KORFHAGE HAD NEVER spent any time in the South until he took a job at *The Virginian-Pilot* in April 2018. But the forty-one-year-old quickly did important work. He chronicled southeast Virginia's disappearing food traditions like Tidewater yock (Chinese noodles sluiced in soy sauce-spiked ketchup) and Greek-inspired Norfolk hot dogs. He covered Hampton Roads' vibrant Filipino and Caribbean food scenes. As a critic, he ate at mom-and-pops and white-tablecloth restaurants.

Korfhage initially avoided sit-down Mexican spots favored by non-Mexican diners. "There's a tendency as a food critic to hunt down 'authenticity,'" he said. "It's a terrible term. But you want to bring people the 'real deal.' So when

you see the familiar Mexican American restaurant, you have a tendency to overlook them. And it's a mistake, because you overlook things like [white sauce]."

He tried his first batch in December 2018 and asked the restaurant owner what it was. Korfhage assumed the white sauce was a regional salsa from the owner's native Nayarit, a state in western Mexico. But the owner explained that the *crema* was something he had only encountered in Virginia.

"Then I began to research," Korfhage said, "and quickly realized it was a Hampton Roads phenomenon."

He couldn't find much written about the condiment, nationally or locally. *The Virginian-Pilot* had only unwittingly touched on the topic; every couple of years, it would reprint a recipe from 2006 due to reader demand.

"The Hampton Roads area is not on the laundry list that food writers have," he admitted, as a sort of explanation. "And for locals, [white sauce] didn't seem interesting, because it had always existed."

His initial story traced the condiment to a since-closed Norfolk restaurant called El Toro, which was one of the first Mexican establishments in the region. El Toro began serving white sauce as a salad dressing in the 1970s, but customers began using it as a dipping sauce for tortilla chips. White sauce spread through Hampton Roads by the 1990s, as Mexican immigrants opened new spots and took with them El Toro's sauce.

Over the years, white sauce grew spicier, reflecting a local embrace of Mexican flavors that tracks with national trends. At first, cooks spiced the dip with crushed red pepper and cumin. Later, they minced jalapeños or added the vinegar from cans of pickled ones. Milk became the base instead of Miracle Whip. It was thinner in some restaurants, oilier in others.

Like any good reporter, Korfhage continued to follow the white sauce trail. After the paper published the article that so many people shared with me this spring, he wrote a follow-up in which he revealed that John Villareal, a Mexican American Navy veteran who had run a chain of Norfolk restaurants in the 1960s, had actually created the white sauce that El Toro later adapted as its own. And Korfhage also heard from Mexican Americans in Richmond, 100 miles away, who said *they* had their own unique white sauce that dated back to the 1970s.

The two white sauce articles went viral. Nationally, many readers viewed white sauce as a regional oddity, like Rocky Mountain oysters or burgoo. Locally, it was one of the *Virginian-Pilot's* most-read stories of the year. Readers responded with comments, phone calls, and letters, many bewildered that white sauce wasn't as common in Mexican food nationwide as, say, cheese dip.

Korfhage's colleagues were surprised by the fervor surrounding the pieces, and kicked themselves for letting the story sit in front of them all these decades. "They learned that something belongs to them," Korfhage said. "That it's part of the history of Hampton Roads. And they didn't really know it until someone else told them."

WHITE SAUCE PROBABLY won't find national traction, but I see it as a valuable metaphor for the New South. It's a stand-in for changing customs and communities. For newcomers and regionalism. For all the things that make *el Sur*.

How many more white sauces are out there? Not the condiment, per se, but the idea? Local customs that tastemakers and burghers regard as quotidian, but that are actually remarkable? That say something about history, migration, and an evolving region, yet remain known only by the people who live it?

Hampton Roads white sauce deserves the same praise and promotion as barbecue and bourbon, hot chicken and Hoppin' John. All of the South's foodways do. It took a relative newcomer like Korfhage to give a Southern tradition widespread recognition. That shows there's still work for all of us to do.

I say that as a challenge to *ustedes* and to myself. A decade ago, I had never eaten at a Mexican restaurant in the South. I assumed they were not just unremarkable, but an insult to Mexican culture. Eventually, I checked myself and visited one. My perspective changed to the point where I now cover Mexican food in *el Sur* at least four times a year.

Virginia white sauce reminds me how much I have to learn, and that my work will never end. And so off to Hampton Roads I go... 🍷

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

THE BEST THAT WE'VE GOT

Staking a claim in a contested zip code

BY ROSALIND BENTLEY

WE ALWAYS KNEW WHITE PEOPLE would come.

When I say “we,” I mean the black people who reared me in our very black neighborhood in Tallahassee, Florida. They would say it all the time: my mother, Mr. Ford who lived across the street, Mrs. Caldwell next door whose house smelled of 7Up pound cake rising in the oven or neckbones stewing on the stove. Ours was a neighborhood of janitors, secretaries, public school teachers, evangelists, mechanics, civil servants, the unemployed. Our homes were cinder block ramblers painted Kool-Aid blue, bubble-gum pink, batter yellow; wooden shot-guns teetering on bony haunches of concrete blocks and little brick ranchers with clotheslines out back. Those houses lined streets named for black celebrities: Calloway, Ellington, Joe Louis. One day, the elders said, white people would want this pocket of town.

They would want it—and likely get it—because location is everything. Our neighborhood, Griffin Heights, sits less than a mile north of Florida State University.

Evelyn Nims sits in the Griffin Heights home where she has lived for more than sixty years.

When I was growing up, head coach Bobby Bowden built FSU into a football powerhouse. People want to be winners. That desire brought more students, more tuition money, more power. The main campus is surrounded to the east by the state Capitol and downtown, to the south by Florida A&M University, and by Tallahassee Community College farther to the west. What lay north of FSU was us: a cluster of working-class, low-income black people on desirable land.

I think I was in elementary school

when I first heard the older folks say we would be displaced. Their prediction frightened me. Would we have to move? Whom would I play with? Would there be a neighborhood store like Bennett's, where we bought cherry Now and Laters and Golden Flake potato chips with our dimes and quarters? By the time Bowden took the team 11-1, the elders' prediction had long been a refrain.

Turns out, dislocation wasn't swift. Instead, it crept, year by year, block by block, house by house, an erosion.

Photos by Willie J. Allen Jr.



A tall wooden fence separates a traditional Griffin Heights home from a new complex inhabited by Florida State University students.

On a visit home this spring, I stood on the front porch of the petite, cinder block ranch my mother bought long ago on a secretary's salary. A sprawling, gated complex of new, luxury student apartments loomed a block away. Up the hill, two more off-campus developments crowded around my elementary school. Every time I visit, the changes make me wonder, *What will become of the neighborhood that I knew?*

What I knew was an imperfect place of abundance; of okra stalks towering over homemade fences. It was a place where older neighbor ladies sold five-cent paper cups of frozen Kool-Aid in summer, the juices slithering down our fingers red, purple, and sweet. It was a place where my best friend, Audra, stood forlorn in her front yard for so long one afternoon we went out to see what was wrong.

"Muh, muh, Mama's making chit-lins!" she sobbed.

Their funk was flagrant, and she needed relief. Audra stayed at our house until they were cleaned, cooked, and plated. (Even now, no amount of hot sauce will convince her to eat them).

Yes, there were burglaries and the occasional shooting in our neighborhood. Yes, drug houses sprouted up. Yes, we were poor. Yet day to day, we didn't define ourselves by lack. We defined ourselves by how we helped a neighbor if we had enough to share. Care was slices of warm pound cake from next door or an offering in return of fresh peanuts for boiling.

Late last year, the president of the Florida Chamber of Commerce announced that 32304, the zip code that holds Griffin Heights, is the poorest in the state of Florida by almost every

measure. Just under 50 percent of children, and 50 to 70 percent of all residents, live in poverty. Shocked and embarrassed, local politicians and business leaders launched a series of "Prosperity for All" community summits. The police department and the city recently started a "clean-up" initiative in the neighborhood. The project targeted trash, crime, and neglected properties. I couldn't help feeling it also meant us.

Each time I read an article in my hometown paper or watch a news clip about



We didn't define ourselves by lack. We defined ourselves by how we helped a neighbor if we had enough to share.

Griffin Heights, the story is grounded in need, want, and woe. FSU sits directly in what should be our zip code, but it has its own postcode, 32306. The last digit officially walls it off—in us but not of us.

In their book, *Gentrification*, Loretta Lees, Tom Slater, and Elvin Wyly identify a language for gentrification which includes terms like *revitalization*, *renewal*, and *rejuvenation*. The words suggest something better can replace what's there. They fail to acknowledge the value of what already exists. The city

But as the new residents come, where do the old neighbors go? What is lost when they depart?

of Tallahassee employs these terms now as it tries to figure out how to bring “prosperity” to the neighborhood where my mother and father brought me home from the “Negro” hospital decades ago. Their generation is dying out. Mine isn’t moving back. Some descendants sell. Others allow emptiness and neglect to ravage their homesteads. Developers buy the properties, fix them up or tear them down, and rebuild cheap, nondescript houses or duplexes. They rent them, it

seems, mainly to FSU students. That is their right. This is how capitalism works.

It’s less unusual now to see a white person jogging or walking a dog. But as the new residents come, where do the old neighbors go? What is lost when they depart? Who will share the bounty of their gardens and tables?

Three neighbors showed me.

FOR THE LAST sixty-four of her eighty-five years, Mrs. Evelyn Nims has lived

in a little bungalow with white siding and russet-red trim at the end of a dead-end street.

There, she and her first husband reared their sons, Barry and Billie, and daughter, Barbara, just three blocks from Philadelphia Primitive Baptist Church, where our families worship. Barbara, Billie, and I sang in the youth choir together. If I still lived in Tallahassee, I’d probably be a member, too.

Mrs. Nims, my mother, and other members of Philadelphia’s Seasoned Saints senior group volunteer at the church’s food pantry once a month. But the neighborhood need threatened to outstrip the larder. So the church started serving Sunday breakfast for some of the kids in the neighborhood—eggs, bacon, grits, and fried fish. In summer, when that wasn’t enough, Barbara told me, the church started feeding the children two meals each weekday.

On Sundays, the little ones stay for services. Inside the sanctuary, their gazes likely wander, as mine did, across a series of Biblical wonders painted on the walls: the search for room at the inn, the crucifixion and resurrection, the catch of 153 fish. In the frescoes, everybody is black and radiant: Jesus, the Virgin Mary, the disciples. Their afros are buoyant, though the woman at the well has a long, wavy perm. Over on a wall in the amen corner, the Devil—hazel-eyed, cloven-hooved, winged, and blond—is tempting a white-robed Christ.

It was hot the day I went to see Mrs. Nims. She, Billie, my mother, and I sat in her backyard under a patio-table umbrella. A few yards away, young tomatoes, okra, and peppers sprouted. Mrs. Nims grew up on a farm on the edge of town.

Ed Duffee Jr. grows crops like okra and sugarcane in his Griffin Heights garden.



A garden in her life is as essential as Scripture. Her grandfather taught her how to grow things. He had learned from his grandfather.

“He’d say his grandfather came from *way across the water*,” Mrs. Nims told me. In that moment, I realized this soft-spoken, elegant woman was still farming as her enslaved great-great-grandfather had. Here, in this backyard, were living ties to the Middle Passage.

Many years ago, she brought back some Meyer lemons from a visit to Ft. Lauderdale. She can’t remember what she cooked with them, but she saved the seeds. As the saplings grew strong, she gave some away, then planted one in her backyard. It’s almost as high as her roof now. At Christmas, there are no sweeter presents than those Meyers. The day I visited, both trees were laden with tiny green fruit, promises of gifts to come.

Once a quarter or so, Mrs. Nims gets letters from speculators asking if she wants to sell her house. No need to fix it up, they say. They’ll pay cash, as is. FSU students have moved into the house next door. Five blocks south is a student dorm and a string of duplexes. A wooden fence separates the Nims’ house from more apartments.

“They want this area,” Mrs. Nims told me. “It’s closer to FSU, but I’ve gotta have somewhere to go. I might as well stay in my home. I’m not going anywhere.”

As my mother and I rose to leave, Mrs. Nims passed along some of her grandfather’s gardening advice. Take the collard stems after you remove the leafy parts, poke a row of holes in the soil, drop in some fertilizer, bury the stems vertically at a depth of roughly half their height, and keep them watered. “And you’ll have plenty of greens,” she assured us.

I’d never thought about starting greens from cuttings. I usually buy them, fully grown, from the grocery store. Maybe this fall, I’ll try it her way.

MR. TONY OSBORNE lives kitty-corner from my mother’s place.

A thick layer of rust-colored mulch covers a strip of ground that runs alongside the length of his driveway. Atop the mulch stand two big barrel grills and one kettle grill, ashen from use.

It was just past dusk when I knocked on his door. Though we didn’t know each other well, he invited me inside. He is a relative newcomer to our street, living there just three years. Based on the cars that routinely stop at the house, and on the stream of young black men who gather there, a couple of neighbors wondered if he or one of his kids sold drugs. This despite the fact Mr. Osborne owns a lawn service, one prosperous enough to afford him a shiny, new, black trailer with his company’s name emblazoned on the sides. The weary way he folded his body onto the couch, his already dark skin rendered ebony from constant labor under a scorching sun, reminded me of the husbands and fathers I grew up around, bone-tired from work.

His girlfriend, Lovey Harris, a nurse, sat working at a computer in the dining nook. Two of Mr. Osborne’s sons lingered outside under the carport, talking with their girlfriends. Earlier that day, I’d told him I wanted to talk about how the neighborhood was changing, but before I got started, he asked me about my mother. Just a few days earlier she’d had surgery. At eighty-three years old, she still cuts her own grass, but Mr. Osborne felt it was time for him to step in and do it free of charge, at least until she healed.

“I’m gonna take care of it because that’s my neighbor,” he told me. There was finality in his voice, and also care.

As we talked, he told me of the ups in his fifty-two years of life: He once made \$65,000 a year as a manager at a grocery distribution center. He told me of the downs: He lost that prosperity to drug



Griffin Heights resident Tony Osborne operates a lawn service and hosts regular barbecues for young men in the neighborhood.

addiction. Now he is back on his feet with the goal of expanding his lawn service.

Looking across the living room into the kitchen, I saw a run of counter space in spices and condiments. I asked about the grills out front.

“There’s a criminal part of the youth that nobody’s doing anything for and I try to counsel them. Because I been in that life,” he said.

Every so often, he soaks ribs or chicken in white vinegar, pats them dry, and dusts the meat with a rub and maybe some garlic powder or onion salt. Then he fires up the grills.

“I keep that vinegar on it and it brings that smoke and keeps it tender so when you taste it, you don’t even want no barbecue sauce,” he said.

He takes a plate next door to Mr. Harris, whose children I grew up with and who used to bring my mother rutabagas

from his garden. The rest of the barbecue feeds some of those young men in the neighborhood still in the life. Mr. Osborne is a Freemason given to quoting Scripture. (“Like God told Peter, ‘Dust your feet off. Keep it moving.’”) His goal is to turn the informal counseling he does at the cookouts into a formal community mentoring program.

“I say, ‘We eatin’ today. We ain’t drug-gin’ or doing none of that. We feedin’ the soul today,” Mr. Osborne told me.

Then he told me about the group of young white men who moved into the house on the corner not long ago. He said they are FSU students. The father of one of them bought the place because it’s close to campus, Mr. Osborne told me. Mr. Osborne cuts their grass. Another group of white students lives in a house across from his backyard. They don’t come to the barbecues, and Mr. Osborne admitted



A home for sale in the neighborhood, August 2019

he had not invited them. They seem nice enough, he told me, but he knows they aren't going to be long-term neighbors. The white students need him to perform a service. The black young men he feeds need him for something more.

"People keep putting on these blindfolds, but if you don't deal with it now, you gon' deal with it later," he told me, referring to the young men he mentors.

For him, looking away isn't an option.

BEFORE I LEFT Mrs. Nims' house, Billie asked if I'd been "up to the farm" yet. Just a half mile away, and still in the neighborhood, it's a verdant, hillside double lot I had passed every day growing up, but never entered. A chain-link fence and NO TRESPASSING signs are supposed to dissuade anyone who might want to help themselves to the crops without permission. If anyone could help me get inside, it was my old neighbor, Mrs. Mary Caldwell, maker of the chitterlings. She told me Mr. Ed Duffee Jr., a deacon at her church, owns the farm. All it took was a call from her and he was ready to give me a tour.

The scent of compost and overripe Japanese plums smothered me as I entered the gate. Mr. Duffee was there waiting in the shade of one of his equipment shanties, cobbled from scraps of corrugated metal and wood. He'd actually been there for hours before I got there, an eighty-one-year-old early riser who long ago learned the cool of the morning is best time to get the most done.

Mr. Duffee, who grew up in Griffin Heights, did what many of us did when we got older: He moved out. A lawyer for many years, he was one of the first black people in the mid-1970s to integrate Killlearn Estates, back then an upper-middle-class, country-club development on the north side of town. Yet even as he moved on, he kept a foothold in his old neighborhood. He did what developers do now: He bought up a few old homes and rented them out. The tenants were African American.

More than sixty years ago, his late uncle-in-law broke ground on this lot. Since then, season by season, it has produced in abundance. In 2004, when Mr. Duffee retired, he started working

on this lot. Much of what he grew he gave away.

Today he sells plums, red and white potatoes, okra, collards, beefsteak tomatoes, ("Top of the line," he told me), navel oranges, ("The sweetest there are,") purple figs, watermelons, cucumbers, grapes, Blue Lake beans, five pecan trees, and rows and rows of sugarcane he grinds and sells at the Frenchtown Farmers Market. (Frenchtown, an adjacent, historically-black neighborhood, is also being "revitalized" with mammoth apartment complexes for FSU students.) Lilies, elephant ears, boxwoods, begonias, and azaleas huddle in the southeast corner of the lot to form a small nursery. Mr. Duffee does a lot of the work himself. He gets some help from younger men in the neighborhood who know little about farming but need short-term work.

While we were talking, his phone rang. I could hear the person on the other end making a produce order. The caller lived in the apartment complex across the street from his garden. The building is different from others in the neighborhood; it's a senior living facility primarily occupied by African Americans. From their windows, they can watch Mr. Duffee work.

Developers offer to buy this farm. Mr. Duffee said it's the land they want, not the plants. He won't sell.

"White people buying houses like mad," he tells me. "Mama and daddy buy it for them, renovate it, and let them live there while they're in school, rent it back out.... Those kids aren't trying integrate into the neighborhood and get to know people."

The plums' nectar, the grape arbor thick and green with leaves and young clusters of fruit: These are precious.

These are gifts. These are ties to an agrarian past first born of force, then nurtured by necessity, and, finally, expressed in choice and joy. Mr. Duffee expects to be the last generation to farm on this hill. When he's gone, he says, maybe it will be sold, the sugarcane plowed under and more student housing erected in its place.

After our conversation, as I worried about what might happen, Mr. Duffee got back to work. There were beans he had to cover with rich earth, okra sprouts to water, bags to fill with potatoes and onions, and the neighbor's order to fill. It was time to share some of the best our zip code had to offer.

WHAT WILL BE different the next time I go home? Who will be gone? Mrs. Caldwell has moved in with Audra and her husband across town. The Caldwells' old home, where Audra stood outside bereft over swine innards, is empty. Mr. Ford, who lived across the street, died a year ago. His grown daughters have said they don't plan to move into his house. Maybe they'll rent it. For now, it's vacant. As my mother gets older, we talk about what I should do with her place when she's gone. She thinks I should sell. My life plays out 275 miles away now. A permanent return to Griffin Heights is unlikely. And if I do decide to sell her house or rent it out, who will live there? Will they smother chicken gizzards and serve them over rice as we did when my mother's money was tight? Will they plant a little potager out back and share the surplus with their friends and neighbors? Will they want to know anything about the people who came before them? Or, will the house and the neighborhood be a short stop on their road to someplace else, someplace "better?" 🐦

Rosalind Bentley is a Smith Fellow with the Southern Foodways Alliance and a senior writer at the Atlanta Journal-Constitution. Follow her on Twitter @rozrbentley.



EIGHTY-SIX TIPPING?

I'm on the fence.

BY JENNA MASON

New York Zoological Society/Library of Congress

“THIS IS WHY WE SHOULDN'T depend on customers to subsidize servers' salaries.”

Tori De Leone had just totaled her take-home tips from a slow brunch shift at Saint Leo restaurant in Oxford, Mississippi, where she waited tables while attending graduate school at the University of Mississippi (and where I still pick up shifts).

Tori and I have often joked that we are basically the same person, despite the dozen years between us. Here, our opinions diverged.

I love making tips. In two decades of serving in diners, fast-casual chains, and fine-dining restaurants across the South, I've never met a server who didn't.

Tori grew up in Oregon, one of seven states that guarantees tipped employees the same minimum wage as hourly workers. She served lunches and brunches at Saint Leo, whereas I usually worked the busier night shifts. In New York, she'd worked as a barista at Maialino, Danny Meyer's Gramercy Park trattoria.

“No tipping was actually a huge selling point for me there,” she told me.

In 2015, Meyer's Union Square Hospitality Group (USHG) began the years-long process of integrating a “Hospitality Included” model into each of its restaurants. The company raised menu prices to include gratuity and used the additional revenue to pay servers, bartenders, bussers, and runners a steady, competitive wage. Under this model, Union Square offers substantial employee benefits, including paid time off, medical, dental, and vision insurance, and a 401(k) with company match.

Meyer was not the first to implement a nontraditional pay structure at his restaurants; Alice Waters, for instance, eliminated tipping at Chez Panisse in 1989. In an era of both celebrity chefdom and Twitter activism, Meyer's

announcement kicked off a debate that has since been fueled by movements lobbying for a single minimum wage for all workers, most notably in Washington, DC, and New York.

A one-wage system offers stability to employees who traditionally work for tips, and it can help balance other inequalities in the industry.

In an interview with *The Washington Post*, activist Saru Jayaraman explains that, post-abolition, white employers used tipping to hire newly freed slaves for next to nothing. Today, restaurants overwhelmingly hire people of color for lower-level positions like food runners and bussers, while offering white employees more lucrative positions as servers and bartenders.

Restaurant Opportunities Center United, which Jayaraman co-directs, reports that women suffer sexual harassment from customers—sexual teasing, remarks, pinching, touching, and pressure for dates—at twice the rate of their male counterparts. Opponents of tipping argue that women feel obligated to tolerate these behaviors for the sake of making a good tip, and they do not trust their employers to defend them.

Then there's kitchen labor. On gameday in a college town, for example, many servers and bartenders leave with hundreds of dollars. The kitchen staff, who crank out plate after meticulous plate for eight hours with hardly two minutes for a break, see no notable difference on their biweekly check. To keep down labor costs, managers often deny overtime in the kitchen. Servers, meanwhile, can pick up shifts for extra cash.

Today, only one USHG restaurant remains to be converted to the Hospitality Included program, and all remain successful. Experiments like Meyer's (and dozens of restaurants that followed suit) counter the common belief that

restaurants could not afford to operate if they paid their tipped employees a full wage. Tori urged me to question that assumption, shrugging, “There are still restaurants in Oregon and Washington.”

Still, the move to abolish a two-tier wage system has gained little traction nationally. Rather than ideological, the reasons appear to be legal, economic, and cultural.

In the South, a lack of unions weakens workers’ ability to organize and lobby for change; meanwhile, national activist organizations on both sides concentrate their efforts on fights in bluer regions of the country like DC, California, Michigan, and New York.

The wealth disparity between the South and those regions matters. Emily Blount, who owns Saint Leo and the newly opened Saint Leo Lounge, regularly dined at Gramercy Tavern when she lived in New York. She based her business model around Meyer’s principles of “enlightened hospitality” but stopped short of a one-wage system. “I’ve gone to [USHG] restaurants and seen a \$20 cocktail,” she explained. No one in Oxford, Mississippi, would pay that for a drink.

Perhaps the biggest challenge in any setting, though, is how servers themselves feel about tipping. Meyer lost about 40 percent of his staff in the months after he implemented his “hospitality included” model. Those who left were mostly longtime front-of-house employees.

Logic and ethics convince me that I should oppose our current tipping system. I applaud employers like Meyer who reject the status quo in favor of fairness.

Would I work at those restaurants? Absolutely not.

This paradox left me conflicted enough to consult my friend Taariq David. A poet and a thinker, Taariq has worked every



position from dishwasher to general manager.

We meet for a beer at the Blind Pig, the closest thing Oxford has to a dive bar. From 4 P.M. until last call, restaurant folks filter in and out of the poorly lit, basement-level retreat to play pool and blow off steam over PBRs and shots of Jameson. Unbuttoned white and blue Oxford shirts dot the crowd as hospitality employees wind down from or gear up for shifts around the Square.

Over a couple of beers, Taariq and I agree that a single-wage system would eliminate the disparity in income between servers and kitchen staff. I would love never to hear another cook tell me, “You literally made \$200 tonight for walking food from one end of the restaurant to the other while we’re back here busting our asses.” He would love for the most essential person in any restaurant, the dishwasher, to earn a wage that reflects his value.

We agree that tipped employees deserve healthcare, sick leave, and a predictable income; that the tipping system makes women more vulnerable to sexual harassment; that it almost always favors white employees over people of color.

We order another round when Delant-ric Hunt, a nine-year veteran of the Oxford service industry, settles in the

booth with us, still in his bar apron from his last shift. I ask De’s opinion on a no-tipping model. He belly-laughs. “Oh, hell, no! They can pry my tips from my cold, dead hands.”

A fellow server toasts to this. “Give me my cash tips, or give me death!” We raise our beers, tap them on the table, and drink in solidarity.

Over the next hour or so, more long-term industry employees stop by our table to say hi or share a drink. Each acknowledges the inequities of the current system before admitting they’d much rather earn tips than an hourly wage.

“The problem is,” Taariq shakes his head, “it’s hard to replace that immediate return on sweat equity.”

Another server-turned-manager nods, “The thrill of getting that big tip for a job well done is a driving force for those who work well in the service industry.”

That’s just it: We know the system is rigged, and we take pride in navigating it to our advantage. We discern whether a party wants a chatty server or one who slips to and from the table unacknowledged. We feel out if a couple requires all the details of the special or just a gloss-over. We oblige, and we make our nut.

When you live check to check or work multiple jobs, as so many servers do, that autonomy means everything. We know, deep down, that it’s an illusion. But it helps us keep going.

We know that, in the long-term, finding a job that offers health insurance and paid leave and a retirement plan is smarter than chasing a wad of cash after a killer service. Maybe someday we’ll demand change. When we do, it will be because we choose to, not because Twitter told us we should. Until then, we’ll take the tips. 🍷

Jenna Mason, who has twenty years of experience in the restaurant industry, is SFA’s content and media manager.

TIPPING POINT? TRUTHS ABOUT TIPPED WAGES

- Restaurant jobs make up seven of the ten lowest paid jobs in America. Four of those seven are tipped positions.
- Restaurant workers are twice as likely to have to rely on government assistance and three times as likely to live in poverty as the general population.
- Seventy percent of tipped workers in the United States are women, and two thirds of these women report experiencing sexual harassment from customers. Women in the service industry are five times more likely to report sexual harassment, and many feel they must tolerate inappropriate behavior
- because they rely on the aggressors to pay their wages.
- The two-tiered system disproportionately disadvantages people of color, who tend to work as bussers and runners, most often in chain restaurants where tipped employees make less money.

Source: Roberto A. Ferdman and Saru Jaramayan, “I dare you to read this and still feel good about tipping.” *The Washington Post*, February 18, 2016.



Does a
cookbook
have the
power
to heal?

Recipes in Black and White

by
**MICHAEL
GRAFF**

Photo illustrations by
YODITH DAMMLASH

THE LITTLE COOKBOOK ENTERED THE world in 2018, edited by a black professor and a white author, collected from members of a white church and a black church, maybe a peacemaker or maybe a disrupter, maybe too late or maybe right on time, but definitely in the right place.

Wilmington, North Carolina, should be the most prosperous city for African Americans in the United States today. More than a century ago, it stood as an example of successful Reconstruction, integrated and proud along the Cape Fear River near the state's southeastern coast. It was North Carolina's largest city, with more black residents than white residents. One of the country's few black-owned newspapers published here. Black businesspeople owned ten of Wilmington's eleven restaurants, and the black male literacy rate was higher than that of white males.

Now, the most visible reminder of those times stands on a bluff at the intersection of Third and Davis streets. Six bronze oars rise in 1898 Monument and

Memorial Park to honor the victims of the only coup d'état to take place on United States soil, when murderous white men overthrew the elected local government and wiped away three decades of progress in a single day.

That day, November 10, 1898, white supremacists lynched dozens or more black people and burned the black-owned newspaper. Some accounts put the number killed at eleven; others say as many as 250. The National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery lists twenty-two lynching victims that day on the weathered-steel monument for New Hanover County—thirteen named, and nine inscribed as UNKNOWN.

It's the most reprehensible event in the city's history, and it was, for the white

World's Greatest Apple Pie

Adapted from the Olive Branch Baptist Church Cookbook, 1991

- Deep dish pie crust or homemade pie pastry
- 6–7 Red Rome apples (or Granny Smith), thinly sliced
- ¾–1 cup sugar
- 2 tablespoon all-purpose flour
- ½–1 teaspoon cinnamon
- Dash each nutmeg and salt
- 2 tablespoon margarine

Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Combine sugar, flour, cinnamon, nutmeg, and salt. Mix with sliced apples. Put apple mixture in deep dish pie crust. Dot with margarine. Top with lattice or crust of choice. Trim and seal edges. Fold strip of foil around rim of crust. Bake for 55 to 60

On November 10, 1898, as many as 2,000 white men marched on the office of Wilmington's African American newspaper, the *Daily Record*, and burned it beyond repair.

terrorists, brutally effective. Black residents fled inland; most never returned. The murderers took control. Their leader, a former congressman named Alfred Moore Waddell, who'd fallen on hard financial times and had boasted of his mission to "choke the current of the Cape Fear River" with black corpses, became the mayor. Afterward, he postured as a reluctant leader called to carry out a necessary mission. Indeed, several prominent North Carolina families supported the coup, including Rebecca Cameron, a novelist who wrote to Waddell: "There is a time to kill. Let it

be buckshot and let it be at close range." Empowered whites reframed the coup as the Wilmington Race Riot, insinuating that there were bad people on both sides, as if the black victims shared blame for the violence. Schools across the state referred to it that way for decades, as did encyclopedias of North Carolina history. Only since the 2000s has the more honest name—the Wilmington Massacre of 1898—become mainstream. The state's largest newspapers, the *Raleigh News & Observer* and *The Charlotte Observer*, apologized in 2006 for their editorials that helped incite and

defend the violence, 108 years too late.

It's hard to trace where black families scattered throughout southeastern North Carolina that November. One hundred twenty-one years later, people of color make up a significant portion of the area's population, but have comparatively little power and wealth.

A little cookbook cannot heal that.

Tammy's mom's cornbread cannot heal that.

Mary's banana cake cannot heal that.

Danyce's baked flounder cannot heal that.

Cookbooks don't have that kind of power, but they can highlight a community's ambitions and project its unified beliefs. And if you stop there, *Memories, Molasses & More*, containing more than forty recipes from members of the historically black Macedonia Missionary Baptist Church and historically white Winter Park Baptist, achieves its mission.

Novelist and professor Clyde Edgerton, from Winter Park, and retired professor Dr. Deborah Brunson, from Macedonia, came up with the idea for the book in 2014, when they were colleagues at UNC-Wilmington. They brought in Peggy Price, a retired high school English teacher and former student of Edgerton's,

Cookbooks can highlight a community's ambitions and project its unified beliefs.

to do the important work of collecting the story behind each dish.

The recipes and as-told-to essays form something modest but profound: In a city whose history has been defined by segregationists, the most segregated time of the week remains Sunday morning, which means the most segregated local literature is probably church cookbooks. In these pages, though, the parishioners share their kitchens and most personal dishes, one next to the other.

AS I READ the book this spring, I thought of all the ways I've seen people try to use food to bring people from different backgrounds together.

I've lived in six North Carolina cities, reported from every military base and estuary and most of the mountaintops; I've visited all 100 counties and eaten meals in most of them, and I married a Charlotte native on the grounds of the state's first art museum. My love for North Carolina is, like most love, complicated. Here, people will proudly tell me that European settlers once called the North Carolina "the goodliest land" and "the pleasantest place," and they'll recite the state motto, *esse quam videri* ("To be, rather than to seem"), but in the same breath they'll call a massacre a race riot.

On the last Wednesday of each month, I eat breakfast with a group of thirty to forty men who hold various leadership positions in Charlotte, about four hours west of Wilmington. We meet under the banner of "building trust across race and culture," and we're an offshoot of a women's organization that started with a similar mission several years earlier. Most

months, we're evenly split among black men and white men, with a handful of Latinos. Some are banking legends, media presidents, and community organizers.

We've been doing this since the police shooting of a black man led to protests and riots in Charlotte's streets in September 2016. Recently we started moving the breakfasts to different neighborhoods each month. Over biscuits and casseroles and coffee, we've discussed everything from Confederate monuments to jobs, propelled political careers and raised money for affordable housing, and had more personal moments where we share the words we heard as children about people from different races.

Often, it seems that our sharpest division is not race but age. For the older men, a breakfast conversation provides a candid space to reflect and rethink a lifetime with racism as a backdrop.

The younger guys are more urgent: Great talk, but now, what do we DO?

I'll be forty in December, just old enough and just young enough to believe the tension is good. After nearly twenty years as a writer here, and after attending countless breakfasts and international festivals and supper events and lunchtime panel discussions aimed at "celebrating our differences," I do wonder: What have they accomplished? Charlottesville still happened one state to the north. Charleston still happened one state to the south. And in an arena in eastern North Carolina this summer, about one hundred miles from Wilmington, thousands of people still attended a presidential campaign rally and unleashed a chant aimed at a foreign-born

United States Congresswoman: "Send her back."

Under those clouds and concerns, I leave my house in Charlotte one Friday morning to spend a weekend in Wilmington, to see what, if anything, can come from a little cookbook.

ON THE FIRST day, Deborah Brunson's husband, Bernard Brunson, shows me the Wilmington he remembers.

"Fourth Street was the hub of the black experience," he says. We're near downtown, four streets east of the riverfront. "When I grew up this was all I knew."

Bernard, age sixty-nine, is a US Army veteran who grew up here and attended all-black schools until the eleventh grade, when integration sent him to New Hanover High.

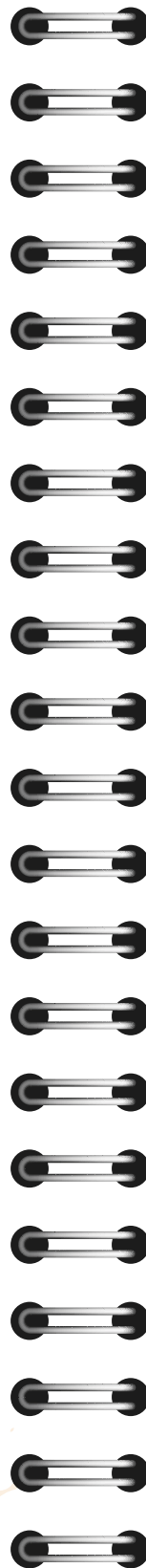
He joined the Army at nineteen and visited thirteen countries before coming home to stay. He fell for Deborah in 1992, not long after she moved here. A friend invited her to a cookout to meet a potential date; that man didn't come, but Bernard was there, and they married two years later. They love Wilmington, but that love is complicated. In the same car ride, Bernard tells stories of catching a fifty-five-pound amberjack off Johnnie Mercer's Pier, and then others of the closed-down, all-black Williston High School and James Walker Memorial Hospital.

At times he talks so fast about what used to be that I can't keep up.

"This was a boxing gym and now it's a bar."

"This was Harris barbershop."

"This was a bakery, ABC Bakery," he



Nut Cake

Follow the same directions as for the Franklin Nut Cake, omitting the candied cherries and pineapple. Add 1 pound of walnuts in the place of the fruits. If you use black walnuts, you might want to use a little less than a pound or use ½ pound of black walnuts and ½ pound of regular walnuts. Also replace the vanilla flavoring with black walnut flavoring.

Pound Cake

2 sticks margarine
3 cups sugar
½ cup Crisco
5 large eggs
3 ¼ cups flour, sifted
1 small can evaporated milk (add water to make 1 cup liquid)
1 tablespoon vanilla
1 tablespoon lemon flavoring

The first shots of the Wilmington Massacre of 1898 rang out at this intersection. Two white X marks drawn on the image by an eyewitness mark where the first two African Americans died.

says, "and it's been converted into apartments."

"All of this that you see around you was 99 percent African American. Now, because of the economy and everything, a lot of things have been taken over. And now it's more whites."

He pauses and attempts to soften his description.

"It's a blended area."

But his words "taken over," hang in the car. In Wilmington, he knows, the phrase holds meaning.

For every picture of Spanish moss-

draped beauty here, there are historical images of people like the Wilmington Ten, nine men of color and a white woman wrongfully convicted in 1971 of firebombing a white-owned grocery store. Recently released notes show that the white prosecutor on that case made notes like "KKK? ... good" while selecting a panel of ten white and two black jurors.

Two cemeteries sitting side by side off of Rankin Street might be the clearest illustration of Wilmington's racist past. Brunson turns the car toward the first, Pine Forest, enclosed by a bent and

I AM ALWAYS STIRRING UP SOMETHING. I really do like to find and enjoy going online to find recipes that I think my husband and I might enjoy. When I find something, I just add my little twist to the course, I want my husband to say, "That's a hit!" It's his way of telling me it's good.

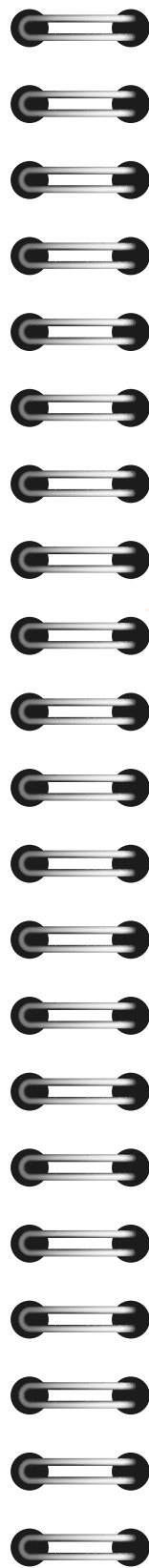
As a young child, I learned to cook from my mother. With that knowledge that I learned, I continued to develop my own culinary skills as another while I cooked for my two sons and my sister. I also enjoy trying new recipes for my husband, who is very health conscious. Thank God.

One of my favorite things to make is my Broccoli and Cheese Bread. It's a holiday special but also a year-round comfort food. The original recipe was passed down to me from my sister through another member of the family. It is so rich and so good that it can be enjoyed by anyone. You can change it up a bit to your liking. This recipe is a good base. You can add things to it to make it your own. I sometimes add three jalapeño peppers to it, which is perfect if you don't mind a little heat. It might be too much for some people, so you have to fix it the way you think you might like it. You could even add bacon or sausage to it!

Cooking can be a lot of fun, even if you're only cooking something as simple as a pan of cornbread.

A native of Wilmington, Barbara Rabb currently lives in Wallace with her husband Myron. She has two sons and a stepdaughter as well as

Alfred Moore Waddell, previously a United States congressman, became the mayor of Wilmington after the Massacre of 1898.



broken chain-link fence. It includes graves of the country's first professionally trained African American architect and North Carolina's first African American lawyer. Several Wilmingtonians from the late 1800s are buried there in unnamed graves. Maybe they were store owners or musicians. We will never know.

Bernard turns around, makes two rights and heads into Oakdale, the white cemetery next door, fenced in wrought iron and sheltered by magnolias.

"That's how deep the system ran," Deborah says from the back seat. "Literally from the cradle to the grave."

Bernard tells me that his sister, who died at birth, is buried at Pine Forest.

I ask him what he would think if, by chance, one of his relatives wanted to be buried at Oakdale.

"Personally, it wouldn't affect me," he says, pausing to look out the window at the pristine grounds of Oakdale, "but that would not be my first choice."

CLYDE EDGERTON, THE author of twelve books and a former Guggenheim Fellow, lives in a 1953 ranch house about two miles from those cemeteries. I visit him on Saturday afternoon. He's sitting on a bench on his back porch dropping red beans and rice on his shirt while talking about racial justice with his mouth full.

"Other Americans see the South as the cradle of racism," he says, "so it's not a big jump to think that the cradle of racism might hold some of the solutions."

He drifts between big, systemic troubles in America, and smaller, local problems in Wilmington. He's been raising

hell with the school board for four years about admissions practices in a Spanish-language immersion program. The program admitted white children at a much higher rate than black children in its early days. Edgerton believes the problem persists; the school board says it's fixed. He sparred with the superintendent in the Wilmington *Star-News* editorial pages in April.

Now in his seventies, Edgerton faces a question familiar to many white progressives from his era: He's been an advocate for civil rights throughout his

Now in his seventies, Edgerton faces a question familiar to many white progressives from his era: Did he do enough?

adult life, but did he do enough? In the cafeteria at UNC-Chapel Hill in the 1960s, his roommate asked him what he'd do if the new black students sat down next to them. The roommate said he'd leave; Edgerton said he'd eat with them. At the time, that might have been notable—as it was in 2008, when Edgerton hosted a big fundraiser for then-candidate Barack Obama in his backyard.

But in the past four or five years, he's come to a hard-stop realization: "You can't have racial reconciliation without racial justice."

There's No Place Like Home

WHILE I ENJOY COOKING FOODS from different cultures, it is the smell of warm teacakes that evokes the best memories for me. My mom somehow managed to make these little cakes for us as an after-school treat even though she worked full time. They were like a cookie, a simple slightly sweet butter cookie. Coming into a home saturated with the smell of sugar, butter, and vanilla was the best!

This memory is something that I carried with me into my own marriage. The first time I made these on my own was after I was married. Eating them brought a sense of comfort and assurance that everything was going to be all right. These teacakes have been a part of my life for as long as I can remember.

Over the years, I have made a few changes to the recipe. I decreased the amount of sugar and sometimes add a little lemon to it. I'm constantly seeking ways to make healthy alternatives without altering the flavor, but Mom's recipe is just too special for me to share.

Manhattan Park, a gathering place for Wilmington's African American community, was severely damaged during the Massacre of 1898.

Deborah Brunson grew up in Washington, DC, in the 1950s. Her mother was from Alabama and her dad from South Carolina. They'd moved north during the Great Migration. They didn't have the chance to advance past grade school, but they were avid readers, and they made sure their children knew the importance of the Civil Rights Movement.

Brunson remembers sitting with her parents at dinner to talk about accomplishments and setbacks over potato salad and collards. Her mother's macaroni and cheese recipe appears in the cookbook.

Brunson graduated from Howard University, earned a master's in communication from the University of Southwestern Louisiana (now UL-Lafayette), and a doctorate at Florida State. At that last stop, she learned about 1898 in Wilmington. She landed a job at UNC-Wilmington in 1991 and spent nearly twenty-seven years teaching courses on interracial communication, communication theory, and community and interracial dialogue.

A few years older than Brunson, Edgerton grew up outside of Durham, North Carolina. His grandparents were sharecroppers. After college, in the summer

of 1966, he took a position as the head counselor in the Chapel Hill chapter of Upward Bound, a federally funded program aimed at giving low-income students better opportunities to attend college. He says about 90 percent of the counselors were black, and the person who hired him, a black woman, joked that when she saw his application she said, "Oh, here's a little white one; we better let him in."

Edgerton served in the Air Force in Vietnam before becoming the "Mark Twain of North Carolina," as his most devoted fans call him. His books, starting with *Raney* (1985), often use humor to expose contradictions in Southern and Christian customs, and the impurities of institutions such as, say, universities. Through fiction, he's fearlessly honest about the places where he grew up and worked.

After he met Brunson in 2014, he invited her to speak to one of his classes, and they became friends. They learned that they were members of sister churches—Edgerton at Winter Park, Brunson at Macedonia. The churches had traded

pulpits a few times over the years, and some members had spent a Sunday or two in the other church. Edgerton, an accomplished banjo player, was drawn to the music at Macedonia.

By then, the idea of racial justice consumed Edgerton. He thought of his childhood in rural North Carolina and how the black people in his segregated community were invisible to him, except when they shopped for groceries. Food, he thought, was the one thing they must have in common. And that's how *Memories, Molasses & More* came to be. Edgerton and Brunson arranged for UNC-Wilmington to publish and print a few hundred copies to sell to the churches.

For the project to reach a wider audience, they needed more than recipes. They wanted to take readers into the contributors' homes, for holidays and ordinary days, and desegregate dinner tables in print.

Peggy Price interviewed most of the contributors personally. Some stories go into great detail. Dorothea Cahill's tale about her cranberry salad, for instance, takes us to her Oklahoma childhood home during the Depression, when her mother would feed "hobos" out of her back door. Clif Harris writes of his mother, Mary Willie Yelton Harris, who brought her "Mountain Pie" down from the hills when she moved from Appalachia to eastern North Carolina in 1918. Gloria Dutch's picnic potato salad is so good, she says, her mother and aunt argued over who taught her to make it. And Jessica Monroe offers a snapshot of life at James Walker Hospital during segregation. Her grandmother worked

But in the past four or five years, he's come to a hard-stop realization: "You can't have racial reconciliation without racial justice."

Invitations to come together are hardly in short supply for people of color. The organizers are often well-meaning white people who want people to reconcile, but who, even in their invitation, reveal that they'd like it done on their terms.

in the kitchen there, and the staff allowed Jessica to hang out after school while she waited for her mom or dad to pick her up.

Through stories like those, the book memorializes people and places that might otherwise be lost. Yet I did not find a single, direct mention of race or racism.

A COLLEAGUE OF mine in Charlotte runs workshops aimed at bridging racial gaps in the workplace. In his program, he explains that achieving trust between two people is a five-step process. The first step is getting to know each other, followed by finding a connection, relating to each other, sharing a common experience, and finally trusting each other. Submitting a recipe and a story for a cookbook fits more or less in the third stage. It's an act of relating, but it's a long way from trusting another human enough to address topics like racism.

For some, though—especially those who grew up in Jim Crow North Carolina—even sharing the stories is a big step.

Of course, they're skeptical. Invitations to come together are hardly in short

supply for people of color. The organizers are often well-meaning white people who want people to reconcile, but who, even in their invitation, reveal that they'd like it done on their terms.

"I can speak for white people—well, some white people," Edgerton tells me. "They sit around and talk, and they leave and they feel better." (Edgerton and I talked for nearly two hours about this on his porch that Saturday, and when I left, I felt pretty good.)

But then what?

Brunson calls initiatives like the cookbook a "sensory involvement" in diversity. She means it's a surface-level engagement—or, as my colleague in Charlotte says, part of the relationship-forming stage.

"This is wonderful," Brunson says. "But how does it advance the quality of life if after I leave here, I have these encounters with the police? Or I can't get a loan? Or a house? Or I'm dealing with issues with how my child is being treated at school. And I'm speaking as a person of color, and I think for people of color, that's why there may be a hesitancy to step into these kinds of things. Because it's like,

OK, well, we've been here before. This'll make people feel good for like fifteen minutes, and then, what has really changed?"

That's what I came to Wilmington to ask, I tell Brunson and Edgerton. What has really changed?

It's hard to quantify, they say. The book can be a piece of a resolution to the city's long history of racism, but hardly the whole thing. And its importance depends as much on the reader's perspective as on the words themselves.

Zach Hanner, a white man who directs the local theater company TheatreNOW, read it and decided to turn it into a stage production. *Memories, Molasses & More*, the theater version, ran during the late summer and early fall of 2018. Everyone who contributed a recipe was invited to attend, and most did.

The ninety-minute adaptation starts with white characters and black characters cooking separately and ends with them around a large table saying grace.

If only it were that simple.

ON OUR DRIVING tour of his hometown, Bernard Brunson's last stop is the 1898 Memorial. He and Deborah walk up the brick walkway, past a patch of black-eyed Susans and wiregrass, and stand in front of the six vertical paddles.

The paddles are meant to symbolize water, its importance in spiritual beliefs in African culture, and how it is a symbol of purification, forgiveness, and renewal. So says the inscription. Another plaque tells the abridged story of the massacre.

On either side of the monument, about halfway down a semicircular walkway,

are two meditation areas, named Peace Circle and Hope Circle. The memorial has become a gathering spot for rallies for everything from the National Day of Prayer to immigrant rights.

Deborah takes a seat in Hope Circle and looks up at the trees. Bernard stands on the hill with the paddles. We all remain quiet. It's a solemn place.

Bernard points toward the highway and the bridge over the Cape Fear River. He tells me a chilling story that was passed down to him. Apparently, after white supremacists killed several black people along this road on November 10, 1898, they lined the streets with body parts of the deceased. Then, the whites gave the road a repugnant nickname. Bernard tells me the nickname, then asks me to not include it in the story.

"That's something people don't talk about," he says. "There's the truth and then there's the truth."

If I forget everything else from the trip, I'll remember this moment. It's as if Bernard wishes he could erase the words from my notepad, delete them from my tape recorder, and swallow them back down to a place where they'll never come up again. If he were contributing to a cookbook, this would be just the kind of thing he'd edit out. By now we've spent most of the day together, riding around his beautiful and complicated hometown, eating crab cakes on the Intracoastal Waterway, telling stories about big fish and family. Still, some truths are too difficult to share because they're too horrible to shed. ♣

Michael Graff is a writer in Charlotte.



A
COMET
CALLED
RAJJI

**Today's South Asian Southern
chefs stand on the shoulders
of the late Raji Jallepalli**

by
MAYUKH SEN

Illustrations by
RAN ZHENG

Fall 2019

41

ONE DAY NEAR THE END OF 2001, the chef and cookbook author Raji Jallepalli emailed her literary agent, Janis Donnaud, to say goodbye. Raji was dying.

She learned she had late-stage gastric cancer that November. In the preamble to her death, Raji prepared herself for the inevitable: At the end of December, she closed down Restaurant Raji, the daring Franco-Indian Memphis restaurant that had earned her two James Beard Award nominations in the previous decade. She shuttered a bed-and-breakfast, Maison Raji, which had just opened a few doors down from the restaurant. She wound down her consulting work at New York City's Tamarind, where she was executive chef.

Donnaud was alarmed by how casually Raji disclosed the news. "I called her—I was like, *are you kidding?*" Donnaud remembers.

But the blasé manner with which Raji accepted her fate, and bluntly shared it

with those closest to her, was in character. She was a renegade. Raji's nonconformity began with her choice to devote her professional life to food, a sharp pivot from the days when she incubated tissue in a microbiology laboratory. Her puritanical Hindu Brahmin family in the Indian city of Hyderabad had pushed higher education; they believed cooking to be beneath her birthright.

She resisted food's pull even as she moved to the United States as a bride in 1969, but she heeded the call two decades later when she opened a thirty-seat, reservation-only Memphis restaurant meant to be her husband Panduranga Jallepalli's tax shelter. Her decision to begin a restaurant constituted a risk. Raji was an outsider in every sense of the word, an immigrant Indian woman with no culinary

schooling, parked in the American South.

Raji's food was as unorthodox as she was. She freed Indian cuisine of the stereotypes that bound it and put it on equal footing with French gastronomy. She rotated the prix fixe menu nightly: a tandoori quail one night; potato gratin animated with onions, garlic, and saffron on another.

French and Indian cuisines may have seemed like unlikely bedfellows to diners primed to think of foie gras and curry as discordant. But not to Raji, whose view of the world was giving and open enough to tease out the complementary traits between the two cuisines. She served tamarind consommé. Corn compote in bowls made from papadums. Pan-seared scallops on zucchini perfumed with garlic and ajwain, smoothed to a paste as green as wasabi.

Putting French and Indian cuisines in conversation with one another, she leveled the imbalances in an unspoken hierarchy that placed French cooking above Indian. "Fusion" had already become a dirty word by the time she made a name for herself. It connoted confused attempts to patch together different cooking languages under the patina of multiculturalism, as if two worlds jostled for dominance on a plate. Raji disentangled fusion from the gracelessness that the label implied.

Her blazing ingenuity tempted food writer Kerri Conan to compare her to a "comet ... generating a culinary lightshow." The comparison feels inescapable when you consider the trajectory of her career and its tragic coda, the force with which she arrived and the speed with which she vanished. Cancer claimed her near the end of January 2002, nine weeks after her diagnosis. She was fifty-two.

But comets have tails, too, and Raji left a particularly long one. Maybe we're ready to see it now.

*Comets have
tails, too, and
Raji left a
particularly
long one.
Maybe we're
ready to see
it now.*

WE'RE IN THE midst of a welcome movement in Southern food. A class of chefs born on the Indian subcontinent, now based in the American South, is widening Southern food's contours. These chefs—among them Asha Gomez of Atlanta, Meherwan Irani of Asheville, Cheetie Kumar of Raleigh, Maneet Chauhan of Nashville, and Vishwesh Bhatt of Oxford—have, since 2018, gathered around the region to stage a supper series, *Brown in the South*. The existence intimated in the title finds expression through Irani's kale pakoras, through Chauhan's "meat-and-three" thali. These dishes take cues from ancestral and adopted homes, planting roots in Southern soil without squandering a sense of the immigrant soul.

If this cohort feels like a family, Raji may be their foremother. "She's such a legend," says Chauhan. "Somebody that all of us are so inspired by."

Two decades ago, the notion of interlaced cuisines like Raji's may have provoked skepticism. The American South now seems more open to blended cuisines. Think of Edward Lee, with his union of Korean and Southern cooking, or of Andrea Reusing, who grabs influences

“I am having an affair,” she reportedly shot back. “But it’s with the restaurant.”

from the whole continent of Asia and interweaves them with North Carolina ingredients. In Memphis, the building that formerly housed Restaurant Raji is now Andrew Michael Italian Kitchen, where the menu knits together Italian and Southern ingredients.

Raji dealt with a far more inhospitable climate than these chefs do today. One to two generations younger than Raji, the current faction of Indian-born chefs in the South still deals with diners who expect buffets with butter chicken. But unlike the chefs of Brown in the South, who blend elements from Indian and Southern cuisines, Raji’s food was resolutely Franco-Indian. She occasionally borrowed from her Southern surroundings, spicing grits with mustard seeds and ghee or using collards in lieu of banana or lotus leaves to hug veal medallions. But her primary objective, as she wrote in her cookbook, *Raji Cuisine*, was to “retain the basic principles and balance of French cuisine while introducing the profound bouquets of Indian cooking.”

This key nuance separates Raji’s work from those of her spiritual successors like Chauhan and Irani. Still, Raji recognized a shape-shifting possibility in Indian cuisine that would enable it to appeal to American Southerners.

RAJESWARI RAMPALLI, as she was born in Hyderabad in May 1949, wobbled her way into the world of food. Her father was a high-ranking government official in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. Because of the diplomatic nature of his role, the family traveled to Europe often. Young Raji was especially drawn to France.

As a child, Raji spent much time in places where her family told her she didn’t belong, like the kitchen and the garden. She couldn’t help it. The art and alchemy of cooking beckoned her to the kitchen, a cavern of coconut milk, lemongrass, and ginger in the hands of Mrs. Ayyer, the family cook whose side she refused to leave. Some afternoons, she wandered through the garden, with its amaranth leaves and ripening fruit. Her grandmother would snatch the young girl back inside, fearing the sun would make her too dark for a man to marry her.

Raji did get married, though. She moved to the United States at age twenty with her husband and transitioned into work as a medical technologist. Over the next three years, she gave birth to her sons, Prasad and Satish. After living in New York and New Jersey, the family moved to Memphis so Panduranga could complete his clinical fellowship in endocrinology.

There wasn’t a sizable Indian community in Memphis in the early 1970s. Shopping for Indian spices was a “serious journey,” Prasad says. In those early years, Raji committed herself to the role of a stay-at-home mother, occasionally doing lab or managerial work at her husband’s practice. Free from the gaze of her parents, Raji’s attraction toward food intensified. Near the beginning of that decade, she began writing a vegetarian Indian cookbook that she never completed.

Back in those early days, she wore saris, but as she spent more time in Memphis,

Raji underwent what Prasad calls an “amazing metamorphosis.” She gradually began slipping into shirts and pants, a cosmetic shift that mirrored her embrace of her adopted Southern home.

“MEMPHIS WAS DEFINITELY not at the front end of the food curve in terms of bringing things in from the outside,” Prasad says. This was the partial impetus for his mother starting a restaurant: “Simply the realization that, gee, there isn’t really any Indian food.”

Raji opened the East India Company on Valentine’s Day in 1989. She fashioned the original east Memphis restaurant in the likeness of a curry house. The initial menu included aloo samosas and chicken vindaloo one could’ve found at a restaurant dotting Manhattan’s Curry Row or Atlanta’s Lawrenceville Highway.

Those choices weren’t quite working for her clientele. So, facing failure, she took a greater gamble. Raji gave her menu a French facelift, motivated by a sudden desire, Prasad says, to mount a fusion project. By 1992, she rechristened the place Restaurant Raji.

Raji made friends with the Memphis food community. A lover of French wine, she turned to Shields Hood, a wine distributor in the city. He warned her about the challenge of her undertaking.

“I kept saying, ‘Look, you’re in one of the worst markets in the country to do an Indian restaurant,’” Hood remembers. “She said she liked my outspokenness.” There were virtually no Indian restaurants in that part of the South at the time, Hood says, especially ones that were white tablecloth, special-occasion restaurants like hers.

Raji wasn’t deterred. Her strategy for success, according to Hood, was to befriend some of the country’s most lauded chefs, including Charlie Trotter and

Jean-Louis Palladin. Leveraging these relationships, according to Hood, helped Raji draw an audience to her restaurant. She cooked with Palladin at his Washington, DC, restaurant, Jean-Louis at the Watergate Hotel, and with Charlie Trotter in his eponymous Chicago restaurant. Her connections to these chefs helped Restaurant Raji attract patrons from outside the city.

“There was a lot of orthodoxy in the French culinary world,” Prasad says. She was willing to disrupt that dogma. Trotter wrote the foreword to Raji’s cookbook, christening her a “Spice Poet”



whose culinary creations were characterized with “a lyricism, even a femininity, not with rugged, bold strokes.”

Raji’s plates, marked by what Trotter labeled a “minimalist approach, maximalist result,” were quiet but vivid in flavor. Take her seared, semi-boneless tandoori quail, which she prepared on a segment of *Great Chefs, Great Cities*, a program broadcast on the Discovery Channel in the 1990s. She rubbed the quail with tandoori masala and pan-sautéed it for three minutes, its skin turning wildfire red. She rested the bird on a bed of corn and cilantro compote that she’d sautéed in butter and seasoned with cumin and turmeric, painting the plate with a sesame-sage vinaigrette.

Though Prasad insists that the family greeted his mother’s decision to open a restaurant with support, Raji claimed in

an interview with the *Boston Globe* that her husband became frustrated with her new career, and the marriage faltered as her profile rose. Panduranga, who died in 2018, couldn't understand his wife's romance with cooking. He asked if she was having an affair. She responded in the affirmative.

"I am having an affair," she reportedly shot back. "But it's with the restaurant."

RAJI WORKED WITH a sole assistant out of a small kitchen that resembled that of a home cook, not a chef de cuisine. In the event that she was out of town, a message on her answering machine would instruct hopeful patrons to "order pizza tonight, guys. See you next week."

She let impulse and spontaneity steer her in the kitchen, where chefs with more formal training might have relied on canon. In her cookbook, she explained that when devising a menu, she began picturing a dish while shopping for fresh ingredients. Afterwards, she began thinking of the sensory elements— "texture, color, flavor, and lightness."

She drew on her memory of Hyderabad flavors. A velouté of curried butternut squash soup recalled the abundance of squash during monsoon season. Cornish

game hens in a lentil ragout reminded her of a soup that she once saw her father's workers make. Her cooking applied French precision to the intense tastes that had never left her tongue. She encouraged others to share her curiosity, to see recipes not as mandates but as ideas with fuzzy edges, "rough sketches for your own culinary adventure."

At the same time, Raji analogized cooking to science, says Prasad. The two practices were bound by a need to ground your whimsy in technique, to have a tight grasp on what variables you could play with and which ones were inflexible. She coupled her patience for the rigors of trial-and-error with her surplus of ideas.

Her process resulted in dishes like sautéed scallops piled high with matchsticks of fried leek and planted in a puddle of zucchini coulis. She seared the scallops in a shallow pool of brandy and oil until they turned amber.

"You never knew what was going to come up, because she cooked every day for that night," Fredric Koepfel, former restaurant critic for the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, remembers. Koepfel was a fan of Raji—the woman and the restaurant. He confesses that the food could be erratic because of the shape-shifting nature of the menu.

"You didn't always get a really polished restaurant experience, but what you got was something, to my mind, even more important than that," Koepfel says. "That was an experience of great authenticity and great character." Above all, he says, Raji "gave worth to the notion of French-Indian cuisine."

John Kessler experienced this unsteadiness firsthand. A longtime dining critic at the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, Kessler traveled to Memphis in 1998 on assignment. While there, he stopped by Raji in the hopes of writing about it. He found Raji herself magnetic.

Raji had no interest in conforming to American imaginings of India and, in particular, of Indian women

"She had really long hair—I don't know why, but it was just something that was such a part of how she moved through the world," he says. "She definitely had kind of a star presence."

But Kessler found his meal there unsatisfying, and he didn't hold back in his review. "I've eaten at Raji only once, but I was frankly disappointed by the menu I sampled," he wrote. The review wasn't an outright pan. He noted that Raji's gregarious personality enlivened the dining room, and that he'd heard from reliable sources that she could be brilliant. He just didn't see that brilliance in cucumber soup with yogurt and poached shrimp that was "pretty but kind of flavorless," he remembers, a good idea that faltered when it came to technical execution. To him, these dishes were hypothetically great but lacked cooking finesse.

Writing the review was a point of stress for Kessler, who liked Raji and wanted a reason to like the restaurant. He wondered if his own predisposition toward fiery Indian food had set him up for disappointment.

In his recollection, Raji called him after the piece's publication and somewhat tearfully explained that she had been

exhausted from a recent trip. The food she cooked on the night Kessler visited had fallen short of her standards. Following the call, Kessler understood her as someone who cared deeply about her craft. He regards Raji as a "pioneer" today.

Raji was pushing Americans to think of Indian food beyond the expectations they'd set for it. "In the US, we did tend to be stereotyped in all kinds of boxes that are convenient for people to put us into," remembers Indian-born chef Suvir Saran, a friend of Raji. "Raji broke out of them and was happy to be out of them and shocked people in not fitting into their version of what they thought Raji should be."

Raji had no interest in conforming to American imaginings of India and, in particular, of Indian women, says Saran. "You could call her a sassy, brassy broad and she would agree with it. She wasn't a shrinking violet." He was struck, for example, by Raji's unflinching love of cigars, which rivaled her love of French wine.

Raji earned national recognition in the 1990s. She cooked at the James Beard House six times between 1992 and 1998. She earned Beard Award nominations for Best Chef: Southeast in 1996 and 1997. She became a consulting chef at Surya, which opened in Manhattan's Greenwich Village in 1998. Raji's 2000 cookbook, published by HarperCollins, crystallized her Franco-Indian culinary philosophy for home cooks. It was a rejoinder to the dominant Indian cookbooks of the time. Even the book's title, *Raji Cuisine: Indian Flavors, French Passion*, reads like a branding statement: Raji's style of cooking was hers and hers alone.

"She came along at a time when her kind of cooking, the flavors, the spices—they were around, certainly," says Raji's coauthor, Judith Choate. "Madhur Jaffrey was already around. But she faced it in a very different way."



THE MOST PROMISING sign that Raji was on the cusp of stardom came in 2000 when restaurateur Avtar Walia tapped her to be the executive chef of Tamarind, a fine dining restaurant in the Manhattan neighborhood of Tribeca. Walia gave her *carte blanche* to design the menu. After Tamarind opened in January 2001, Raji occasionally traveled to New York, though she spent most of her time in Memphis.

It was a time, Saran remembers, when Indian food was still struggling to gain wider appreciation in the United States. “We’re always the next best cuisine,” he says, speaking of Indian cuisine in the context of fine dining today. “When she started Tamarind, it wasn’t even close to the next best thing.”

Raji’s cooking at Tamarind was a showcase for her culinary guile. She served she-crab soup jolted with ginger juice and dusted with saffron and chives; she cooked a *nargisi kofta*, an ancestor of the Scotch egg, with chopped lotus root and cheese in place of meat. Though the restaurant still stands today, only a handful of Raji’s original dishes live on.

In a 2001 *New York Times* review, restaurant critic William Grimes wrote that Tamarind “treats Indian cuisine as a genuine culinary language, like French, able to assimilate nontraditional ingredients and techniques.” His two-star review read like a three.

Current *New York Times* restaurant critic Pete Wells ate at Tamarind shortly after it opened, when he was the restaurant editor at *Food & Wine*.

“It’s not like she became a fixture on the New York food scene, but on the other hand, she did it right in the sense that people accepted that restaurant immediately,” Wells says. “A lot of out-of-town chefs have a hard time with that.”

Raji died less than a year after Wells’ visit to Tamarind. Her flight path suggested

Raji is remembered by few and forgotten by many. This may be proof that food media, predisposed to venerate rising stars, suffers from a distressingly short memory.

aborted promise. “Everyone thought it was a shame because she was so young,” Wells says. “She had just opened this place that seemed to have so much to say that no one was saying.”

If the wider nation dealt with the tremors of her loss, Memphis felt her death more acutely. The city knew it lost more than a restaurant when she died.

“It lost her vision of how food could be expanded and turned into a sort of ideal of world cuisine, rather than just focusing on one country,” Koepfel says. “And it lost a great personality.”

IN THE WEEKS following her cancer diagnosis, Raji faced her imminent death with clear eyes.

“She took it a lot better than her kids did. Probably better than I did,” says her second husband, Louis Reiss, whom Raji married in 1999. “She was all ready for it.”

In Reiss’ recollection, Raji didn’t die with many unfulfilled aspirations. She

had no desire, for example, to be on television like Emeril Lagasse. Her primary goal was to have her restaurant and bed-and-breakfast coexist in Memphis under her control.

Raji’s premature death froze her in time, almost cosmically so. “They have this picture of her in their minds—her at her peak of doing what she did,” Prasad says of his mother’s acolytes. “I’m sure Mom would’ve liked being remembered that way very much.”

Many colleagues say they were blindsided by Raji’s death. Outside of her family, she had told few people of her cancer diagnosis. One admirer, chef Vishwesh Bhatt of Snackbar in Oxford, Mississippi, had no idea she was sick. He says he owes his career to Raji, whom he met a few times throughout visits to the restaurant in the late 1990s.

“I don’t think I would be doing what I’m doing without seeing her do what she was doing,” Bhatt says.

An immigrant from Gujarat in India, Bhatt was pursuing a culinary career in Oxford when he first visited the restaurant. There were unspoken parallels between the two chefs: He grew up in a middle-class family, spending his childhood in the city of Ahmedabad. After a gap year with his family in Strasbourg, France, where his physicist father took a post as a visiting professor, Bhatt eventually attended the University of Kentucky. His own route to food, like Raji’s, was a jagged detour from academia. He found her outlook affirming.

“She was the first one to make this light bulb go off in my head that you can do elevated Indian food and people will come to eat it,” says Bhatt. “She was in this little restaurant in Memphis and had

already started turning heads.”

Through Bhatt, Meherwan Irani of the Chai Pani Restaurant Group recently learned of Raji. He found a copy of her cookbook, which is no longer in print. “There’s a couple of restaurants, I’m not going to name names, with chefs that think they’re groundbreaking with Indian cuisine,” says Irani. “I’m flipping through a book and I’m like, *Dude, this was done twenty years ago by this woman and nobody’s giving her recognition.*”

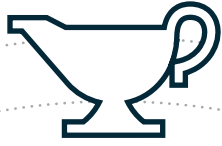
What struck Irani about Raji’s story was how ahead of her time she seemed. Similar struggles echo in the current generation of chefs to which he belongs. “When I read her story, what jumped out at me was that, that early, she had managed to break through,” he says.

Diners would be mistaken if they believed that chefs like Irani, Bhatt, Chauhan, Gomez, and Kumar were the first to express their respective takes on Indian cuisine in the American South to national acclaim. These chefs stand on Raji’s shoulders. Yet Raji is remembered by few and forgotten by many. This truth may be proof that our food media, predisposed to venerate rising stars, suffers from a distressingly short memory, looking forward without reaching into the past.

The new class of Indian chefs in the South appears to be winning the battle Raji fought over two decades ago, asserting that Indian cuisine that resists convention can thrive in the American South. Bhatt recalls Raji often for this very reason: Her career has become a guiding credo for his own.

“I had somebody that I looked up to,” Bhatt says. “A living example of what was possible.” 🐦

Mayukh Sen is a writer based in New York. He is working on his first book, to be published by W. W. Norton & Company, about the immigrant women who have shaped food in America, and he teaches writing at New York University.



CIRCLING

ARKANSAS

TO HOME

On not achieving escape velocity

by JAY JENNINGS



Photo by Matt White

The author (r) with his siblings
in Little Rock, ca. 1968



WHEN SUMMER ARRIVES IN ARKANSAS and tattooed arms hang from car windows and strum guitars on street corners, there's one inked image that seems to be more prominent than others. It is a simple outline of the state's borders: the ragged Mississippi River to the east, the

I was born in November of 1957, the same fall when the integration battle for Little Rock Central High earned national headlines. The fallout stained the city's and the state's reputations, rendering Arkansas in public consciousness a place of intolerance and intransigence.

straight-line parallels that define the north and south, the cartographic lean that forms the western line, and the eccentric notches that have Missouri fondling us from the northeast and Texas thrusting unnaturally into our southwest.

Those borders, of course, have been subject to dispute, negotiation, treaty, broken treaty, political influence, war, and the natural mutability of rivers. Once established, however, the lines reify the idea of being a member of a community within boundaries. And I find something moving about the desire to permanently declare your allegiance to a place so flawed in the making in a tattoo so simple. A tattoo that's merely an outline, with a big empty space in the middle, an image that says, "I share a kinship with everyone here."

I'm no historian or poet, but I have been writing and reading and thinking about Arkansas for most of my life. My family roots here are deep. On my mother's side, we have a diary of an ancestor's journey from Limestone County, Alabama, to Camden, Arkansas, in 1838. It is mostly an account book, but he did complain about Randolph, Tennessee, being "a little ugly town." No complaints after he got to Arkansas. My mother's family lived in Camden until she and her mother moved to Little Rock in 1954. She married my father that same year.

On my father's side, my grandfather, a timber man, traveled from Chicago to West Helena, Arkansas, in 1912. He worked for the Chicago Mill and Lumber Company, branding his initial J into the cut end of trees he approved for processing. He fell in love with and married a woman from Clarksdale, Mississippi. After living in West Helena for a decade, they moved to Little Rock in 1925, and my grandfather started the first Chrysler-Plymouth dealership in town, which my father joined when he got out of the service in 1945.

I was born in November of 1957, the same fall when the integration battle for Little Rock Central High earned national headlines. The fallout stained the city's and the state's reputations, rendering Arkansas in public consciousness a place of intolerance and intransigence.

My own schooling was marked by legal and bureaucratic maneuvering to find integration remedies through busing, our attendance zone changing yearly so that I was enrolled at a different school every year from fifth through ninth grades. By the time I graduated from high school, I was eager to leave Arkansas. That was in 1976. To my inchoate mind, there was no *there* there (yes, I had already read Gertrude Stein, and yes, I was kind of an a-hole). The "higher" culture I aspired to, the kind you found in Stein's salon in

Portis' work captures something of the character of Arkansas and Arkansans: the eccentric individual with outsized and sometimes irrational home-state pride, like Ray Midge lumping Little Rock in with Geneva and Tokyo; or, for that matter, Sam Walton thinking he could build an international behemoth out of a five-and-dime and base its headquarters in Bentonville.

Paris, was nowhere to be found in Arkansas, or so I imagined.

Over the next decade, I attended college in Tennessee, graduate school in Chicago, and taught high school in Dallas. There, at Half Price Books, I discovered a novel that would change my ideas about Arkansas literature and culture. It was by Charles Portis and called *The Dog of the South*. The cover leapt out at me because it included a map of Arkansas with a big star over Little Rock. Here was a book whose cover was telling me, like the outline tattoo, "I share a kinship with you." And a *New York Times* story about the book revealed that Portis himself lived in Little Rock.

I was twenty-six, the same age as the punctilious but directionless *Dog of the South* protagonist Ray Midge, and I was also pretty punctilious but directionless. *The Dog of the South* contained Little Rock places and people and language I knew: the auto shops on Asher Avenue; Ray's mother-in-law and wife, Norma, who call Ray a "pill"; a woman who lived behind the Game and Fish Building. There were some private Little Rock jokes, like this one, when Ray complains about some hippies he meets not having watches: "The watch factories were humming day and night in Tokyo and Geneva and Little Rock so that everyone might have a cheap

watch, but not one of these hippies had a watch." Probably, if you weren't from Little Rock, you wouldn't know that there was a big Timex factory there.

It was the funniest book I'd ever read.

When I left my Dallas teaching job and briefly moved back to Little Rock, I wrote to Mr. Portis and mentioned that I was moving to New York to pursue a career as a writer, as he had done back in the 1960s. He quite unexpectedly invited me to lunch at a bar called the Town Pump. We met a couple more times after that before I moved. Once I was in New York, we kept up a correspondence, and we'd get together when I returned to visit my parents. When I moved back to Little Rock for good in 2007 to work on my book *Carry the Rock*, about football and Central High fifty years after the integration crisis, we would frequently get together for an afternoon beer, the day-drinking prerogative of two "freelance writers," which is how he most frequently thought of himself.

In 2012, I edited *Escape Velocity*, a collection of Mr. Portis' miscellany. Despite that descriptor, some of the pieces are quite substantial, including longform travel stories, deeply reported journalism, an 8,000-word memoir, and a full-length play. More often than not, Arkansas is both setting and subject for these pieces.

Photo courtesy of the author

Portis' work captures something of the character of Arkansas and Arkansans: the eccentric individual with outsized and sometimes irrational home-state pride, like Ray Midge lumping Little Rock in with Geneva and Tokyo; or, for that matter, Sam Walton thinking he could build an international behemoth out of a five-and-dime and base its headquarters in Bentonville. In fact, the title of this collection is taken from one of my favorite lines in *The Dog of the South*: "A lot of people leave Arkansas and most of them come back sooner or later. They can't quite achieve escape velocity." That line is both funny and poignant, both specific and universal. It refers to the hold that everyone's home has on them and it also locates the mysterious gravitational pull of the particular place called Arkansas—not just on people like Sam Walton and Bill Clinton but artists like Johnny Cash and Pharoah Sanders and

Iris DeMent and Mary Steenburgen.

There is, of course a large group of Arkansans whose life experience in the state is best represented not by Portis' eccentrics but by the brutal and beautiful directness of Richard Wright's *Black Boy* and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Wright lived in West Helena at the same time my grandfather was walking the woods and marking trees. Angelou was born two years before my mother and grew up in Stamps, a town about sixty miles west of Camden. My book *Carry the Rock* includes a chapter about the last lynching in Little Rock, of a man named John Carter. Through that research and writing, I dimly glimpsed the experience of what being a black Arkansan was like, but Angelou and Wright and lesser-known African American writers from Arkansas like Henry Dumas, whose work I encourage you to seek out, are the places to go for that.

The author's parents, Walter and Medora Jennings, on their wedding day





A child watches as marchers, some carrying American flags, protest school integration in Little Rock, August 1959.

Arkansas' benighted history of race relations exploded into one of television's first documentary miniseries with the daily broadcast of events on the lawn outside Little Rock Central High School, where mobs harassed the nine black students who attempted to enroll there. The students were first prevented by Governor Orval Faubus from that right, then escorted in under the protection of federal troops when President Eisenhower intervened. All year, they were tormented inside the halls of the

school, and the governor's continued devotion to segregation caused all public schools in Little Rock to be closed the next year. Arkansas' troubles were estimated to have cost the state enormously. By the account of one of the state's leading businessmen, William Bowen, "the city and the state had become pariahs to investors."

The most frequent comment I heard about the events in my youth was that they were "shameful" and "embarrassing." What wasn't embarrassing was the

John T. Bledsoe/Library of Congress

coverage by the local newspaper, the *Arkansas Gazette*, which won a Pulitzer for editorials decrying the resistance to integration. Nor were the efforts of the city's leading women, who organized as the Women's Emergency Committee to successfully pressure the powers that be to accept integration and open the schools. When the schools did open again in the fall of 1959, big-city newspaper reporters returned to write about it, and a young *Gazette* columnist named Charles Portis took exception to the broad brush

with which the national press, airdropping in without having suffered through the painful upheaval, often tarred the state's citizens. He lampooned the outsiders as a collection of "wilted Dacron and damp mustaches." Nine years later, he would express himself again through the *True Grit* protagonist Mattie Ross, who declares, "People who don't like Arkansas can go the devil!"

When I moved to New York in 1986, I had the vague idea that leaving the place I was from was the way to capture the experience that had formed me, as Joyce had to settle in Paris and Italy to write about Ireland. I believed that distance was required for some perspective. And much of what I did write in New York had to do with Arkansas.

During the 1990s, Bill Clinton's ascent to the highest office in the land gave Arkansans nearly a decade of elevated self-importance. In business, that same era saw the astounding growth of northwest Arkansas, thanks to Walmart, Tyson Foods, and J.B. Hunt trucking. When I would come home to visit from New York during the Clinton administration, my mother often greeted me at the airport with a hyperbolic but still proud, "Welcome to the center of the universe."

When I conceived of writing a book about the Central High football team and the history of Little Rock race relations, I knew that I could not do the required reporting from a distance; I'd need to uproot my New York life and come back. I had no book contract. I had not written one word. All I had was a promise from Central High coach Bernie Cox that he'd allow me to follow the team through the 2007 season.

There was another reason to return as well.

In the summer of 2006, a cleaning

woman entered my brother's apartment in Dallas per her weekly schedule and found him lying in bed, a washcloth over his eyes, dead. He'd suffered a massive coronary at age fifty. My sister, who lived near him, called me in New York to tell me. Six months later, my mother died in Little Rock on New Year's Day 2007. She'd been taken to the hospital on New Year's Eve, and I got the call that night that things were not going well as I stood on my stoop in Brooklyn, watching the fireworks from Prospect Park burst over the trees and illuminate the New York sky. Some five months after that, I pulled into Little Rock in a Ryder rental truck, filled mainly with boxes of books, my two cats in stacked carriers between the seats of the cab. I moved into the same apartment building where my then eighty-five-year-old dad lived.

Despite the tragic circumstances that brought me here—the deaths of my family members, the needs of my elderly father—everything that I treasure in my life, everything that I will remember on my deathbed, occurred after I moved back to Arkansas and reconnected with this place.

I wrote my first book, *Carry the Rock: Race, Football and the Soul of an American City*, a story that I'd been preparing my whole life to tell.

I enjoyed ten more years with my dad. He died in 2016, at age ninety-five, just a few days after we enjoyed Thanksgiving dinner at the Capital Hotel in Little Rock.

I also got to spend almost every Monday afternoon from 4 to 5:30 drinking with Charles Portis and other characters at the corner of the bar of the Faded Rose. We rarely talked about writing. I learned from him—and from the others there, a collection of brilliant, kind, hilarious Arkansas eccentrics—that if you have your eyes and ears open to the language and concerns and jokes of

the people around you, you don't need to get an MFA in creative writing. You've got all the material you need right there. That friendship with Charlie Portis gave me the opportunity to unearth and preserve all of his work that had been forgotten. I believe it will endure.

Sometimes when you fail to achieve escape velocity, you don't just return aimless and lost. You complete a circle. Back in Arkansas, I found a stronger voice as a writer by breathing the air and walking the ground I'd left. I wrote about my brother's death after I sat in the stands of Little Rock's historic minor-league baseball field, which was due for demolition, and remembered the summers we'd roamed the bleachers. I wrote about my mother for the *Oxford American*, about how the seemingly mundane diary she kept as a fourteen-year-old subtly revealed her grief over the death of her father. And as I wrote my book, I asked my father about growing up in Little Rock in the 1920s. He even remembered, when he was six years old, a mob gathering outside the house of the police chief, who lived three or four houses down on his street, before they went on to lynch John Carter.

The Arkansas I returned to was different from the one I'd left in 1986, in many good ways. The state, like much of the rest of the country, now had good breweries. The continuing academic excellence of Central High acted as a firewall, in some ways, against the complete re-segregation of public schools. There was a more robust literary culture. The Arkansas Literary Festival (now called the Six Bridges Book Festival) brought writers from all over the country, and I met native Arkansans who were doing work at the highest level. Among them are Kevin Brockmeier, whose books are as *sui*



**Everything that I treasure in my life,
everything that I will remember on my
deathbed, occurred after I moved back to
Arkansas and reconnected with this place.**

generis as Portis', and though he often teaches at the University of Iowa, will not live anywhere other than Little Rock; and Hot Springs native Trenton Lee Stewart, who created the middle-grades series *The Mysterious Benedict Society*.

And of course, there is the *Oxford American*, where I was invited to join the staff as a senior editor in 2015 by Eliza Borné, a Little Rock native with deeper roots in Arkansas than I have even, and who is the equal of any editor in New York. (She proved it when the magazine won a National Magazine Award for General Excellence in 2016.) I never imagined in 1986 when I left that I could enjoy such a fulfilling and challenging professional life here in Arkansas.

One Sunday, at Christ Episcopal Church in Little Rock, the church where my father was an altar boy and the one in which I was baptized and grew up, I was ushering and struck up a conversation with a woman who was leaving after the service. More conversations followed, as did lunches, movies, and dinners. She was a Mississippian like my grandmother. We fell in love and were married at the church where we met, where my family had been members for nearly a century. In January, our daughter was born, the sixth generation of my family to have been born in Arkansas, and in April she

was baptized at Christ Episcopal Church as well, sixty-one years after my own baptism there.

In Bentonville, Arkansas, some three hours northwest of Little Rock, an art trail dotted with sculptures and installations leads from the edge of downtown to the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art. About halfway along the trail is a circular building, one of the artist James Turrell's Skyspaces. Inside, a round seating area reclines you at an angle, directing your eyes toward the large opening in the ceiling, framing the sky. Some of Turrell's Skyspaces have square holes; this one is round. Twice a day, some twenty minutes before dawn and again before dusk, the artist has designed a gentle light show that changes the colors inside the building, around the opening, and therefore changes the sky. It's mesmerizing. The first time I visited the Skyspace, I woke a half-hour before dawn. I was alone as I reached the structure and took a seat and waited for the sky to gradually lighten with the sunrise, charged with the light of Turrell's artistry. There I was, tilted at an angle like my state's western border, not trying any longer to achieve escape velocity, perfectly at home, gazing up through a circle at Arkansas' limitless sky. 🍷

Jay Jennings is a senior editor at the Oxford American magazine and the author of Carry the Rock: Race, Football, and the Soul of an American City.

BUSTED SOOKS, RANK PEELERS, AND WHITE- BELLY JIMMIES

Mudlarking words for crabs

BY BERNARD L. HERMAN

IT'S AN EARLY SUMMER AFTERNOON at Bayford. A breeze kicks up, the air is clear and fresh, the sunlight on bright white boat hulls and shimmering water is blinding. Crabbers tie up at Bayford wharf in succession. Each boat with its two-man crew offloads bushels of Chesapeake Bay blue crabs. Andrew Bunce is there tabulating and fulminating about catch, quality, and people who can't count. In the shadow of a seafood truck, he's created an office furnished with a bushel basket stuffed with blue crabs just caught and landed. The crabs wriggle and scratch in their packed confinement as Andrew fields and confirms orders on his cell phone and writes down the catch counts hailed from the wharf. The sound of motors shutting off and voices drifts into the oyster house. H. M. Arnold, the oyster house proprietor, grabs a bushel basket and heads out to the dock. H. M. is there for the peelers that he will shed

into soft-shell crabs. "Docking fee," Andrew smiles.

Folks come and go exchanging greetings, one-liners, and rough good humor. Drivers load their refrigerated trucks, consolidate the contents of bushel baskets, and organize their cargo by the crabs' sex, size, and condition: number ones, number twos, number threes.... Listening to the back and forth, there is, I realize, a code for crabs and a lot of words to complicate it.

Walter Brunk works with his father, Russell, unloading their boat.

"So, what's the count?" Walter shouts to Andrew.

Andrew calls back, "I got you for three and two-thirds ones."

Russell affirms, "Yep."

Andrew adds to the inventory, "Two and two-thirds twos."

Russell, "Yep."

"Two threes. Two and a third fours,"

Photos by Bernard L. Herman



A basket of just-caught jimmies



elaborates, “Tangiermen call them lemons because they’ve got that yellow sponge on them. Cushions. That’s a busted sook, too. That’s what Tangiermen call them—cushions and lemons.” The number system, he notes, “They’ve always had that for going up the road and selling them. That’s what they go by.” A glossary, I speculate, could be useful. Russell agrees, “So people understand what the hell the lingo is. They’ve probably got a whole other language up there in Maryland.”

William W. Warner’s masterful and poetic book of 1976, *Beautiful Swimmers*, chronicled the crab industry, concentrating on the Crisfield area and its environs on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. He provided sidebars to the crabbing industry in Virginia with a particular emphasis on winter crab dredging, when boats would work the bottom for dormant female crabs slumbering until the arrival of the springtime mating season. Andrew Bunce remembers crab dredging without pleasure: “I was crab dredging, which used to be our winter fishery. I ain’t the only one this has happened to. You pull these big steel dredges on the bottom that dig the crabs out when they’re hibernating for the winter and the hydraulic hoses broke. My hand was caught in the dredge and I went straight down to the bottom with the dredges. It wasn’t fun! It was winter! It was January! We were working in a fleet of probably sixty or seventy boats. Some people rode right by me because they didn’t want to miss a lick on the crabs.” He laughs grittily.

“Of course,” Andrew continues the tale of his journey to the bottom of the bay, “the boat looked like it was about a mile away, although it was probably only fifty yards. I guess I was panicking. The guy

Andrew hollers, “And one busted.”

Russell confirms, “Yep. Sounds good to me.” He turns to his son, “What’ve you got? Three threes, Walt?”

Walter replies, “Two threes.”

Russell asks, “What’s this here?”

“Busted sooks,” Walter responds.

Andrew confirms, “You got two threes, two and two-thirds twos.” Andrew cautions, “They got to be hard and five and a half.”

Walter stakes his reputation, “I stand by them today, because I touched them.”

I ask about fours and busted sooks. “White crabs,” Russell enlightens me, “are fours and busted sooks are fives.” Then he says, “They’ve got a different system here.” I take his word for it. Russell senses my confusion and helpfully explains, “Number ones are five and a half and on up and a hard crab. A good full-meat crab. The twos are five inches

and a good hard crab. The threes are clean sooks, shedded sooks. Fours are just white-belly jimmies—shedded ones. Ones that are hollow, ain’t got much meat in them, are fours.” He illustrates, “Like these. See, they’re just shedded, they’re not real hard. They’re still a little soft under there. There’s not much meat in them.” A five, he clarifies, “that’s a busted sook.” Referring to the watermen of Tangier Island further up the bay, he

I was working with, he picked up one arm and threw me right over the top of the dredge into the bottom of the boat. I think he was more scared than I was! Still had my boots on. Some people drowned with that happening.” He looks out over the creek on this warm afternoon, “Hell, that was about one of the commonest jobs you could mate on was crab dredging. You were working grass. You were out in the cold. It’s just nonstop work. It’s a labor-intensive job. They’ve cut it out, trying to make the crabs come back. I don’t care if they bring it back or not. You won’t see me doing it!” Our conversation stutters and breaks on a rising breeze. Later I tell the tale to Steve Bunce, Andrew’s older brother, and he shakes his head, “He’s hard. You can’t kill that son of a bitch!”

The trade in blue crabs remains an important part of the Eastern Shore economy, and it traces its origins back to the arrival of the railroad and advances in food processing and preservation in the late 1800s. A correspondent to the Accomac newspaper the *Peninsula Enterprise* enthused in 1888 about “the possibilities of the crab industry and the source of revenue it opens up to many of our people at a season of the year when they are comparatively idle.” Offering proof, the editor quoted an Onancock businessman, “This is our second year in the crab business at this point, and on last Monday and Tuesday we bought about 13,000 crabs and on those days shipped to New York 860 dozen soft crabs.... The wages of the ‘crabbers’ amount to from \$1 to \$6 a day.” A subsequent contributor to the *Peninsula Enterprise* wrote in 1896, sharing the particulars of another firm, that “has engaged quite extensively in the soft crab trade, and also utilizes thousand[s] of hard crabs. He has the hard crabs steamed and the meat picked out, which

he ships to market in gallon tin cans. He has employed in his crab factory at Franklin City from 15 to 25 women and children.” Little remains of Franklin City today, and crab-picking operations on the Eastern Shore of Virginia are a dwindling enterprise.

There is much to be learned from words for crabs and how vocabulary expresses the taste of place at a point where natural history, commercial enterprise, and community life come together. Words for crabs break down into overlapping categories. First, there is the Latin (*Callinectes sapidus*), which translates as beautiful swimmer with the afterthought of savory appended. There are words that describe the crab through the arc of its life cycle. There is an abundance of words, some overlapping, that place the crab in its market and kitchen histories. Kenny Marshall, retired waterman and decoy carver, cuts to the essence of the labor those many words for crabs perform. “There is no such a thing as a crab,” Kenny Marshall announces. “My dad,” he says, “used to get on me if I said, ‘I sent my ball into that tree.’ He’d say it landed over by that maple tree or that black walnut tree or that cherry tree. It’s not just a tree! Call it what it is. Same thing as with a hammer. There’s no such thing as a hammer. It’s a claw hammer, a ballpeen hammer, a carpenter’s hammer, a rip hammer.” Kenny is laughing, “You don’t just have a crab!” Point taken. Precision seasons the language of terroir.

Writing on the crab industry in Maryland for *Field and Stream* in 1905, Winthrop Roberts provides some basic terminology that serves as a starting point:

There are six stages of a crab’s life, commonly classified as follows: First the “hard crab,” or one [in] its natural condition; second, a “snot,” or one that



Eastern Shore crabs bound for market

has just entered the shedding stage; third, a “peeler,” when the old shell has begun to break; fourth, a “buster,” when the new shell can be seen; fifth, the “soft crab”; sixth, a “paper-shell,” or “buckram,” when the new shell is beginning to harden. During hot weather it takes from two to three days for a “snot” to become a “peeler.” One tide will often change a “peeler” to a “buster,” and another from a “buster” to a soft crab. A few hours after shedding the crab has reached the “paper shell” stage, and within three days the hardening process is completed.

I grasp the process, but the term “snot”

is news to me. I need help and turn to H. M. Arnold.

H. M. tutors me on the Eastern Shore of Virginia crab lexicon. Cleaning spot in the cool interior of the oyster house after a summer dawn of gill-netting on Nassawadox Creek, we listen to radio news reports of the rarity of a tornado that hammered the shoreline just to our south a week earlier. H. M. lays out the crab basics that others will embroider in conversations to come. He begins, “You got the he-crab, the he-peeler, then you got the jimmy. Number one jimmies are five and a half up. Then number twos, they’re five to five and a half for the jimmy.” In the progression, H. M. provides, a he-crab is an immature male,

and the mature males, jimmies, are classified by size for market. Andrew amplifies this point, “Males, they’re called jimmies. They grade them out different sizes. You have your number ones, which are five and a half and up. You have your jumbos, which are six inches and up. Your number twos, which are five- to five-and-a-half-inch crabs.”

Words for female crabs are a bit more involved, but the fundamental principles of categorizing crabs in the lingua franca of the marketplace holds sway. “The female,” H. M. starts, “she doesn’t have to have any size. Once she’s mature, the female, she’s done all she’s going to do as far as getting any size. Could be a small one; could be a big one.” Andrew helps out, “You have your females, which they call them sooks, and they go any size. When they have their eggs, they call them busted sooks, lemons, and sponge crabs and cushions. They’re the ones that are getting ready to rub their eggs off.” Kenny Marshall elaborates, “A sponge crab, that’s an adult sook who has dropped her egg apron out and you can see the eggs in under her apron. They’ll start off real pale orange and get darker and darker and darker until they’re almost black just before they hatch out.”

Andrew explains, “Then you have your immature females, which are called she-crabs. I’ve heard the immature ones called virgin females. I heard that one last year when some guys from Carolina sent a bunch of she-crabs up, and they told the truck driver they were virgin females,” Andrew laughs. “A crabber will pull your leg in a second to sell his stuff,” he snorts with good humor. Under the umbrella of the female crabs, I learn of the she-crab (in addition to virgin, I’ve heard sally), sook (a clean sook for market is a number three), busted sook or lemon or cushion or sponge (an egg-laden crab for market is a number five). Dizzying!

I wonder about the smallest crabs. H. M. sometimes refers to them as bugs but notes that there is no real terminology for the smallest. Kenny Marshall underscores this point, recalling that there were no words for the small crabs he found up in the guts, “They were inconsequential. You didn’t talk about them. They didn’t exist as far as anybody was concerned.” No market, no name.

Number threes, the just shedded jimmies, are known variously as white crabs, paper shells, buckrams, and buckys. Kenny Marshall clarifies, “A buckram is a soft crab that’s stiffening up getting ready to get hard shell again. . . . We call them buckrams. Some people call them paper shells. It’s poor. It’s not good to eat, for steaming or anything. They’re real white. They haven’t had time for the weather or the water or whatever to brown them up. Easy to pick, there’s not much meat to them.” A buck all but hardened is a white crab or number four. A hardened crab—sook or jimmy—grown heavy and dull in color, on occasion even barnacled, is “rusty.” Words for crabs are piling up.

Their existence crosses a threshold into the universe of soft-shell crabs. Crabs emerge from winter dormancy in a “first run” in May or, as Oyster waterman Jack Brady times it, “If they were picking the strawberry field, we’d start mudlarking the next day.” These crabs, crowded into their old shells, ready to forage, and starved for sex, are set to shed their old armor—an event that provides procreative opportunity around a moment of vulnerability. As H. M. teaches me, you can see the process unfold through signs discerned in the back fin, or swimmer. It commands a practiced eye. All crabs entering the molting or shedding phase are peelers. Peeler crabs become the soft-shell crabs favored by gourmands—or serve as fish bait.



Loading pots in Bayford, Virginia

Culling is its own art. “A lot of people,” Andrew begins, “have to flip the crabs over to see whether a male or female, but the longer you do it, you can just look at the tops because you know jimmies got blue claws and the sooks got orange claws. You get where you can tell just by looking at them. Like peelers, you look at the fins for the signs. But H. M. and I can damn near look right at the crab and

see how it’s fat-looking and all that—it’s a rank peeler. Just by the looks of it.” Andrew explains his expertise, “That just comes from years of looking at them.” He pauses for an instant and dismissively adds, “It’s a lot of all back and no brain. You don’t have to be too smart to do this job.” I could not disagree more—experience and a fine-tuned sensibility with nature are rare gifts. 🍷

Bernard L. Herman is the George B. Tindall Professor of Southern Studies and the interim chair of the American Studies department at UNC-Chapel Hill.

.....
From *A South You Never Ate: Savoring Flavors and Stories from the Eastern Shore of Virginia*. Copyright © 2019 by Bernard L. Herman. Used by permission of the University of North Carolina Press. www.uncpress.org

WHAT'S FOR DINNER?

Home cooking can—and should—include Indian cuisine

BY PRIYA KRISHNA

MORE THAN FORTY YEARS AGO, IN her first cookbook, *An Invitation to Indian Cooking*, Madhur Jaffrey wrote an optimistic introduction about the acceptance of Indian food into American households: “Today Americans especially seem to have a great desire to experience the ‘real’ thing, an authentic taste, a different life style,” she wrote. “It is a hopeful trend and leads me to believe that if Indian food is ever going to come into its own in America, this is perhaps the time for it.”

I recently interviewed Jaffrey at an event, and I read back that quote to her. “How wrong I was,” she said, sighing.

Since Jaffrey wrote *An Invitation to Indian Cooking*, the population of Indians in the United States has grown from about 206,000 in 1980 to close to 4 million.

Yet Indian home cooking occupies scant territory in food publications, recipe sites, and cooking shows. Coverage tends

to involve versions of expected restaurant fare—butter chicken, tikka masala, naan—adapted for home cooks. Through their prolific work, people like Jaffrey and fellow cookbook author Julie Sahni insisted that Indian food could be a part of everyday American home cooking. Still, somehow, dishes like roast chicken and spaghetti are seen by many as the norm for home cooking, while Indian food, when featured, is relegated to “project” cooking—rarely the kinds of dishes you could make on a Tuesday.

Indian food is also still largely defined by the word “curry,” a somewhat meaningless term popularized by Europeans during their colonization of India to describe the various sauces and stews they encountered. The term allowed them to erase regionality or nuance among dishes. It led to “curry powder,” the yellow-hued seasoning sold in American grocery stores. Even Jaffrey herself,

Indian home cooking occupies scant territory in food publications, recipe sites, and cooking shows. Coverage tends to involve adaptations of expected restaurant fare—butter chicken, tikka masala, or naan.

after railing against “curry,” published cookbooks with the word in the title simply because, she told me, she felt like she had no other choice.

Grocery stores now sell multiple varieties of miso and fish sauce—but rarely curry leaves or chaat masala. That may have to do with food publications, which have written those East Asian ingredients into consumer pantries for weeknight cooking yet have overlooked so many common Indian ingredients. The cuisine continues to be portrayed and perceived as complex, difficult to execute, and overly rich. As a result, home cooks are less likely to embrace Indian recipes.

Chitra Agrawal, who owns a line of Indian condiments called Brooklyn Delhi, nearly shut down her company last year. Her achaars just weren’t selling. So rather than focus on pickles, she reluctantly pivoted to products with more familiar names and uses: curry mustard and curry ketchup. Tikka masala- and curry-flavored “simmer sauces,” which similarly rely on consumer recognition, are the brand’s newest additions.

This is the environment in which I wrote my cookbook, *Indian-ish*, which came out earlier this year. It’s about the dishes my mom taught herself to cook

when she immigrated to the United States. Rooted in the Indian food of her childhood in Delhi, but used ingredients and flavors that she found in Dallas, Texas, where I grew up. My mother didn’t spend all day standing over the stove in our suburban Dallas home. On weeknights, when she returned from her job as a software developer, she pulled together twenty-minute dinners like dal chawal and aloo gobi. She used feta for saag paneer and roti as a pizza crust. Once I started testing the recipes for *Indian-ish*, I decided to position the book as an accessible entry point into Indian home cooking, and a story of migration and culinary evolution.

This blended approach might be the best way forward in America, says Vishwesh Bhatt, the chef of Snackbar in Oxford, Mississippi. He says that Indian Americans need to speak directly to their heritage and setting. The problem with the way Indian food has been marketed “is that we are trying to sell this as something that is far away and something exotic and different,” he says. “We forget that all of this is in the history of America. America doesn’t exist without the search for Indian spices. We don’t talk about the importance of spice trade to the formation of this country.” He points to popular dishes in the South—like deviled eggs, Country Captain, and piccalilli, all of which rely on spices from South Asia.



Cheetie Kumar co-owns the restaurant Garland in Raleigh, North Carolina, where she serves coconut shrimp in a Bengali-inspired broth and corn cakes with paneer. “Bringing a personal story to these Indian restaurants and imparting the memories of our childhoods and our mom’s kitchen is the first step” to people accepting Indian food into their own kitchens, she says. This is not a dumbing down of Indian food—it’s a thoughtful, deliberate localization.

“I don’t think Indian food will come to America through regional foods” of the various Indian states, says Jaffrey. We may instead get paneer corn cakes and my mom’s saag feta. People like Kumar and Bhatt “have taken real ideas from Indian food and put it into a modern way of American eating,” she says. “That’s wonderful, and if it comes from us, that’s always good.” The next phase is translating those restaurant dishes to the weeknight dinner table.

Indian home cooking may never look like what it does in, say, London—where Indian ingredients are more commonly understood and available. Jaffrey points out that the tie between Britain and India runs much deeper due to colonization.

Consider that the United States is only 243 years old, whereas Britain has millennia of history. America “is just beginning to learn about food,” she says. “We have to evolve a cuisine, and we are all going to be a part of it. There are a whole lot of us who have a say in the matter.”

That evolution could mimic the trajectory of Italian food in America, says Krishnendu Ray, a professor of food studies at New York University. When Italians first came to the United States in 1880, their cuisine was abhorred. It took about 100 years for Italian food to



become accepted into the canon of American home cooking, and now so many households keep a few boxes of pasta and a can of diced tomatoes on hand for whipping up a quick dinner. There are plenty of time-intensive Italian dishes out there—lasagna from scratch, timpano—but in American grocery stores, there’s even more refrigerated ravioli, frozen eggplant parmesana, and jarred tomato sauce. Italian food is convenience food.

Indians first arrived en masse to the United States in the 1960s. We’ve still got time before our food truly settles into American kitchens. It may not take a full 100 years, Ray says. There are more Indians in America now than there were Italians back then, and ideas move much faster thanks to the Internet and social media.

I belong to a generation of relatively new challengers to a barrier that Jaffrey, Sahni, and others have long tried to crack. The difference, Jaffrey tells me, is that my peers are less willing to compromise, and we exist in a more open landscape than she did. We won’t write books with “curry” in the title just because our publisher told us to, she says. And she’s right. We are ready to tear down the kitchen wall. 🍴

Priya Krishna contributes to The New York Times, Bon Appétit, and others. She is the author of the cookbook Indian-ish.

SPRING SYMPOSIUM



THE FUTURE OF THE RESTAURANT

MARCH 28, 2020
at HAVEN
2515 6TH AVE S,
BIRMINGHAM, AL

TICKETS, PRICED
AT \$150, GO ON
SALE TUESDAY,
JANUARY 7, 2020



Special thanks to Greater Birmingham Convention & Visitors Bureau and Alabama Tourism Department



BEHOLDEN

This object speaks. What does it say?

BY SHANE MITCHELL

Image courtesy of the author



Freed African American children in front of their schoolhouse in Beaufort, South Carolina, ca. 1862. Their missionary teachers stand on the schoolhouse steps.

I HAVE LONG HELD MESSY ASSUMPTIONS about this old potholder, with its tiny, meticulous stitching banded in fragile blue silk ribbon. On a stained brown needlepoint field, two black figures dance. One holds her red skirt high, the other kicks up his heels. In freeform cross-stitch below, a celebratory message proclaims: WE'S FREE.

My family, rice planters in the Carolina Lowcountry, owned slaves and fought for the Confederacy. My husband's family, rooted in northern New York,

were abolitionists. One served as a conductor on the Underground Railroad. The potholder may have belonged to him. It definitely passed down to his granddaughter, Margaret "Mimi" Thompson Quackenbush. After Mimi died, my mother-in-law inherited it.

My husband and I are now custodians of this Black Americana artifact. That genre, which has earlier roots in European blackamoor art and extends to Jim Crow-era mammy iconography, employed dehumanizing caricatures to rationalize

Hubbard & Mix/Library of Congress

subjugation. Our needlework potholder, dating from the mid-1860s, was stitched to communicate a different message.

It was born of a moment when white women's societies, focused on abolition and, later, black uplift, used their domestic skills to raise money for these causes. They baked cakes. Used needle and thread to express their political views. Sold potholders like ours at anti-slavery bazaars and fairs.

But representing the other was fraught and subjective, as it remains so today. Language and drawings from this era often infantilized enslaved people, says art historian Cheryl Finley, a visiting professor and curator at Spelman College. Even the language and drawings used by abolitionists relied on these tropes. "The

**The WE'S FREE
potholder was never
intended for practical
use at a hot stove.
It was made to
be a symbol.**

potholder seems to celebrate the prospect of freedom, but actually subverts it," Finley says. "That iconography, together with the use of dialect, produces a caricature that mocks the freedom of formerly enslaved people." From our present-day perspective, "it is denigrating," says Finley.

On the other hand, craft objects can be hard to read, says Whitney Stewart, who teaches material culture history at the University of Texas at Dallas. Stewart argues that determining the intent of a craft-maker is more difficult than it is

with an author or artist. To understand how this potholder could have been an emblem of the abolitionist movement, but is now considered offensive by modern standards, she compared it to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In the 1852 novel, Harriet Beecher Stowe depicted black characters in ways we would now recognize as racist, yet in Stowe's day, abolitionists used her novel and those caricatures to argue against slavery.

Four hundred years have passed since slave traders first shipped West Africans, by force and under threat of violence, to the Virginia Colony. America is still reckoning with that reality and the culture created by that commerce. Our WE'S FREE potholder was never intended for practical use at a hot stove. It was made to be a symbol.

In search of symbolic context, I discovered the existence of an earlier abolitionist potholder with the same dancing couple, one that includes a more radical and subversive message: ANY HOLDER BUT A SLAVEHOLDER. This style was still popular in 1882, when a young admirer gifted one to Frederick Douglass. On receipt of his potholder inscribed with that message, Douglass, the great advocate of black liberation, responded, without apparent condescension, "It was beautiful in a dear little girl like you to read and think kindly of my life and history...I appreciate the holder and the letter very highly..."

Both of these potholders are artifacts of material culture, embedded with stories from the past. These require contextualization and benefit from historical knowledge. That's why the next home for the WE'S FREE potholder that has been in our family for so long will be a museum. 🐦

Shane Mitchell is a James Beard Award-winning journalist and writes the "Problematic Crop" series for The Bitter Southerner.

Piece of Land, Peace of Mind

MY NINETY-EIGHT-YEAR-OLD GRANDMOTHER IS MOST AT HOME in her garden. Like the rainwater that nourishes the red-clay Alabama soil she tends, gardening keeps her full of life. It serves as her connection to our landowning ancestors. I am not an avid gardener, but I find comfort in photographing her work. I took this photo on her ninety-fifth birthday. Her garden is sacred ground to both of us, serving as a symbol of our family's past, present, and future.

— JAI WILLIAMS, *photographer and writer*



Gravy is a publication of the Southern Foodways Alliance, an institute of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi.

The SFA documents, studies, and explores the diverse food cultures of the changing American South. Our work sets a welcome table where all may consider our history and our future in a spirit of respect and reconciliation.

JOHN T. EDGE Editor-in-Chief
johnt@southernfoodways.org

MARY BETH LASSETER Publisher
marybeth@southernfoodways.org

SARA CAMP MILAM Editor
saracamp@southernfoodways.org

DANIELLE A. SCRUGGS Visuals Editor
danielle@southernfoodways.org

RICHIE SWANN Designer
richieswann@gmail.com

CARLYNN CROSBY AND OLIVIA TEREZIO
Nathalie Dupree Graduate Fellows and
Fact Checkers



A better cocktail for a better world.

Water is at the heart of everything we do at Maker's Mark. Without it we couldn't even begin to make our bourbon. To help combat the rapid rise in ocean pollution, this summer we've partnered with United By Blue to remove trash from our world's oceans and waterways. Help us create change by choosing a Maker's Mark® cocktail and posting a picture of it with #CocktailsForCleanups.

Find out more at makersmark.com/cleanups.

makersmark.com

WE MAKE OUR BOURBON CAREFULLY. PLEASE ENJOY IT THAT WAY.
Maker's Mark® Bourbon Whisky, 45% Alc./Vol. ©2019 Maker's Mark Distillery, Inc. Loretto, KY
All trademarks are the property of their respective owners.

Maker's
 **Mark**