



FALL IS AT THE DOOR

Chicken-fried redemption

BY JOHN T. EDGE

Mary Tillman Smith

I MARK EACH FALL IN OXFORD BY three arrivals.

In the weeks leading up to the first football game, I hear the University of Mississippi Pride of the South marching band practice, cymbals crashing and drums thudding as they march across a field that borders a patch of woods that borders our house. I'm not a college football obsessive (nor a college marching band obsessive), but I'm big on pomp and circumstance and pageantry.

At about that same time, my friend Lisa Howorth, the bookstore owner, novelist, and longtime night mayor of Oxford, installs a painting by the late folk artist Mary Tillman Smith in the front window of Square Books. Rendered in house paint on roofing tin, the legend FALL IS AT THE DOOR/I THANK THE LORD reads like a promise of cooler weather and a herald of the game-day crowds that will soon throng our streets.

My Instagram timeline marks the transition, too. Gone are pictures of sunburned families on white-sand beaches. By September, every other shot shows a game-day friend, bound for their old college town, out to reenact their youth. For alums who flock to Oxford, that migration yields photo after drunken photo of late-night chicken-on-a-stick sessions.

Deep-fried and heat lamp-warmed at a Chevron three blocks north of our house, Oxford chicken-on-a-stick tastes like the spawn of a state-fair midway and a middle-school cafeteria. I'm not a big fan. Neither is my friend and neighbor Jack Pendarvis, who wrote in *The Oxford American* of the rage that bubbles in him when drunk college students stumble

home, dropping Chevron refuse as they go, leaving his yard "dotted with pellucid white bags as far as the eye can see, greased to a ghostly glow."

My ire is rooted less in the litter and more in the knowledge that these stick-mounted protein delivery vehicles don't satisfy. Sober, the dry flesh, threaded on a pointy piece of wood, squeaks beneath my teeth. Drunk, those battered nuggets lack the endearing grease and salt blast of pizza rolls or potato logs.

But as the oak leaves threaten to brown, hope springs equinoxal. Late this summer, hope made itself (chicken) flesh as I drove north toward home from the Mississippi Book Festival in Jackson. At the Sayle gas station and convenience store off I-55 at the Charleston exit, where the sail-shaped logo above the pediment reads RIDE WITH US, I bought a different chicken-on-a-stick, made with more than just threaded breast meat.

Stacked with rounds of potato and onion rings, laced with chicken that on prolonged contact with salty dill pickle slices had turned curiously green, and battered with a pepper-shot batter that went shatter-crisp in the deep fryer, I drizzled this chicken-on-a stick with no-name hot sauce and ate it in six greedy bites. Until I tasted the Sayle version of what a Frenchman might call brochettes de poulet I feared my dislike of chicken-on-a-stick telegraphed some sort of civic self-loathing. Now I know better. I just need to convince friends who live downstate, where Sayle runs eleven locations, to mule in skewers of the good stuff on their game-day travels to Oxford. 🍗

John T. Edge is the founding director of the SFA and the host of True South on the SEC Network. His chicken-on-a-stick opinions do not reflect those of the entire SFA staff.