

RATHEAD RILEY: THE GREAT GATHERER

He's also known as SFA's Auction Wrangler.

BY ROB LONG

Mike "Rathead" Riley is the inaugural recipient of the SFA's Standard-Bearer award, given in recognition of exceptional service to the SFA and the South.

THE FIRST WORDS MIKE "RATHEAD" Riley said to me were, "Who are you? And why are you here?"

It was more than ten years ago. I was holding a chicken leg at the time. In that respect, it was a typical Southern Foodways Alliance Symposium. And he posed the question with such disarming bluster, with a smile and a firm hand on my arm, that I did what you do when Rathead Riley enters your life for the very first time.

I told him everything. The drumstick remained mid-air. My chicken hand was held in place by Rathead's friendly grip. And I told him who I was and that I had come to Oxford, Mississippi, from Los Angeles; that my father's family was from the South; that I had read John T. Edge's *Southern Belly* and that it had guided me through the South on a road trip the summer before; that I was a little

dumbstruck by the brilliance of the Symposium's speakers and program; and that my chicken was getting cold.

He released my arm with a laugh. "Nice to meet you, lad," he boomed. "My name is Rathead."

But what's your real name? I asked. "Rathead. Rathead Riley."

It seemed too early in our friendship for insulting nicknames. I don't think I can call you Rathead, I said.

His smile faded and he looked at me intently. "I really wish you would," he said.

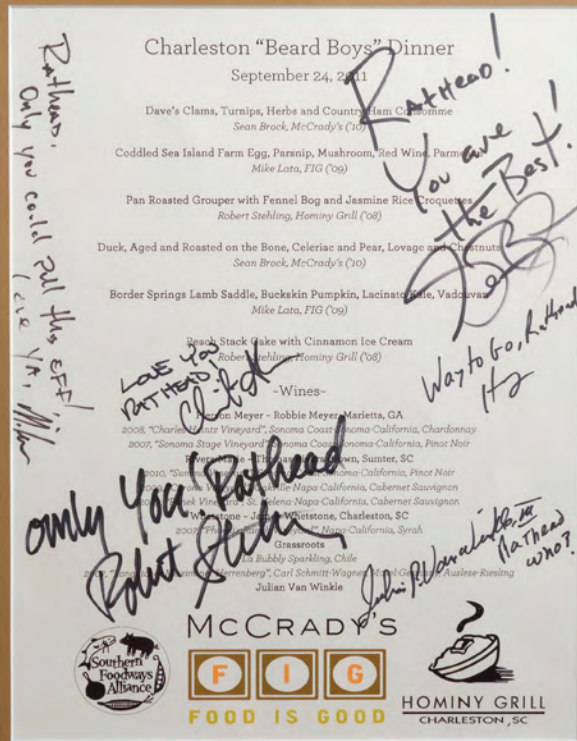
And so of course I did. Rathead has that effect on people.

For many of us, he is the first person we meet at an SFA event. "I stand at the back of the room at an SFA event," he told me recently, "and when people come in, I shake hands with them. It's social curiosity. I want to know who those

Photographs by Shawn Poynter

Mike "Rathead" Riley at his home, which is filled with mementos of SFA and his many food adventures.





people are. My favorite question is, Why are you here? Why are you at the SFA? It just ...” He searches for the right word. “It just gathers them in.”

When Rathead Riley talks, he often makes a gathering-in gesture. I’m pretty sure it’s unconscious. He makes a wide and open circle with his arms, like a dancer or a circus bear. It’s hard not to lean into the gesture. It’s hard not to feel the gravitational pull of Planet Rathead.

I have watched the scene repeat many times since that first moment. I have seen Rathead walk into a room of near strangers and turn them into fast friends in the time it takes an ordinary person (me, for instance) to order a drink and stand awkwardly against the wall. I have watched Rathead make his way through a crowded restaurant, snaking behind the bar and then disappearing into the kitchen, only to emerge a few moments later with a couple of line cooks in tow clutching cold beers, gifts from their new best friend. I have watched, slack-jawed with astonishment, as he charms and cajoles and marshals rooms of auction-goers into spending more than they had planned—a lot more, always—on Rathead-conceived and Rathead-assembled dinners and events, all to benefit the Southern Foodways Alliance.

One time, I approached Rathead and a group of people, and the group was laughing so merrily together, so much like old friends that I was inspired to ask, even though I knew the answer, how long they had known Rathead.

“We just met,” was the answer. And then, more quietly: “Who is this guy?”

First things first: Rathead Riley was not born Rathead Riley. He was born Michael Riley, and despite the perfection of his Southern style and manners, he was born in New Jersey. His family moved to Jacksonville, Florida, a place of good neighbors and cookouts and cold beers in the backyard. After high school, Mike Riley went

up north a bit to Lexington, Virginia, to study at Washington and Lee University.

It was sometime during his second year at W&L when Mike Riley came back to his college room with a rather drastic haircut. It was short enough to amplify the perpendicular quality of his ears and the pointy-ness of his nose, and it inspired his roommate to blurt out the first thing that came to his mind, which was that Mike Riley’s haircut made his head look like a rat.

The nickname stuck. And so in 1968 Mike Riley became Rathead Riley, and it’s impossible to imagine that moment without also imagining a thunderclap, or a burst of heavenly light. In the movie version of the life of Rathead Riley, this scene is accompanied by Richard Strauss’ “Also sprach Zarathustra,” which is the fancy name for the music that plays in the movie *2001: A Space Odyssey* at the moment the human race achieves its full potential. In other words, it was a very big moment.

HE HAS TOLD that story many times, of course. When you insist that people call you Rathead, you’re obliged to unspool the tale. I have heard it many times. Most recently, though, I heard it on a muggy September afternoon in Bristol, Virginia, on the screened-in porch of the house he shares with his wife, Linda. I was there trying to get Rathead Riley to do something—maybe the only thing—that makes him uncomfortable and cranky. I was trying to get him to talk about himself.

“Do you think you were Rathead before you got the nickname?” I ask.

A flicker of irritation crosses his face. “How could I be?”

“Well, you were still yourself, right? I mean, you had your personality and your—”

He interrupts me with a wave of his



hand and taps his watch. Rathead has given me thirty minutes to ask my questions, and he's eager to begin what he calls "rosé time."

"When I introduce myself to people as Rathead," he says, "it often draws a chuckle. People say, 'What?' But think about walking into a room with the nickname Rathead as opposed to coming in with your name, Rob, or whatever. In a fun way, it gives you a leg up. Because people will say, there are nine Robs in this room, there are four Bills, two Marys—"

"But only one Rathead," I say.

He nods. "The nickname has served me well."

About the only person who does not use the nickname is Rathead's wife, Linda. She calls him Mike, and if you listen closely you can hear a quiet emphasis in her voice as she does so. "Mike and I ..." she will say, or she will sometimes fix him with a look after a long night out and say, "Mike, it might be time to go ..." To Linda, Rathead Riley is always Mike Riley. Perhaps that's because Linda does not need to be "gathered in." Rathead, for his part, almost always refers to his wife by her full name. It's "Linda Riley and I ..."

or "I went there with Linda Riley," as if the blunt force of his nickname could be softened by this little tidbit of chivalry.

The house they share—they are empty-nesters, with three grown daughters and assorted grandchildren—is big, airy, and surrounded by trees. On the walls are framed menus from Rathead's many SFA-benefit dinners and original paintings by Linda Riley. There's a large and beautiful kitchen, a stocked wine cellar, windows overlooking the treetops of the sloping back lawn.

Rathead started his career as a junior executive in the coal business. Coal was the economic lifeblood of the region, and the business had pretty much stayed the same for decades. Coal producers would sell their product to a middleman, who would in turn resell it to someone else, usually a steel manufacturer. (Steel requires a lot of energy to produce.) By the early 1970s, the Japanese and European steel industries were shaking off their postwar doldrums and it occurred to the entrepreneurial Rathead Riley that it might make more sense for his coal-producing company to sell directly to steel manufacturers around the world.

It's hard to picture the big, generous, boom-voiced Rathead of today as a suited young coal industry executive, asking for permission from his bosses to try something new. But that's exactly what he did. Soon he was on a plane to Paris, tasked with developing relationships and connections with steel producers throughout France. Tasked, in other words, with gathering in.

Another "Also sprach Zarathustra" scene from the Rathead Riley biopic: Cut to a fancy three-star restaurant in Paris. Young Rathead Riley—who has not quite convinced his new French customers to use his W&L nickname—is hosting an important dinner. He has gathered around the table the key steel makers of

THIS PAGE: Artwork by Amy C. Evans



France, and he is attempting to wine and dine them into becoming direct customers of his company. The dining part is easy: These are Frenchmen, after all. They know their way around a menu.

The wine part, though, is a problem. As the sommelier deposits the gigantic wine list at Rathead's place—he's the host; ordering the wine is his responsibility—he's suddenly overcome with the realization that he doesn't know a thing about wine. He has no idea which wines go with which dishes, or how to make sense of the various growths and appellations and villages and communes that fill the unreadable book in front of him.

Somehow, the sommelier senses the panic and comes, discreetly, to his rescue.

If you're with the wrong people, it doesn't matter how good the food or wine is. You won't enjoy the meal.

Perhaps Monsieur would like to start with a white wine? And then maybe a red for the meat? We can also offer a dessert wine at the end if Monsieur would be agreeable?

Monsieur was agreeable. And though the crisis was averted, Rathead Riley made a vow to himself: This would never happen again. On his return to Bristol, he invested in an at-home wine course, the *Windows on the World Complete Wine Course* by the legendary sommelier and wine educator Kevin Zraly. He taught himself what all of those growths and appellations and villages and communes really were.

Rathead became an oenophile, and what's more, he convinced his friends to join him. Soon they had created a wine club, the Bright Young Oenophiles of

Bristol—BYOB, for short—and hosted annual wine dinners with guest chefs from around the South. Not long after that, when his daughter was an undergraduate at the University of Mississippi, she told him about a new organization on campus called the Southern Foodways Alliance. It seemed like something he might be interested in.

It was, in fact, exactly that. Linda Riley and Rathead joined the SFA. Rathead gathered in some of his BYOB friends as well. For a few years, in fact, the Bristol area boasted the highest per capita membership in the Southern Foodways Alliance. Rathead joined the SFA board and was the key driver of its fundraising efforts. From there it was just a short, straight line to the Taste of the South weekend at Blackberry Farm, in Walland, Tennessee, where every January a thoughtful and meticulously planned auction—dinners and events and experiences that simply cannot be found anywhere else, for any amount of money—is conducted by the most cheerfully relentless auctioneer ever, Rathead Riley.

His official title at that event is Auction Wrangler. His unofficial title is Southern Foodways Alliance Rain King. His yearly work assembling the lots and his electrifying performance with the auctioneer's gavel have allowed the Southern Foodways Alliance to grow in reach and impact.

"Why do you do it?" I ask.

Rathead looks at me, then at his watch. I have kept him long enough. He sighs.

"It's the history, the substance, of what's going on in the South when it comes to food. I think that all of the content that the SFA has developed over the years is magnificent. It's important."

All of that is true, of course. Rathead's devotion to the Southern Foodways Alliance and its mission is unwavering. But what's curious is that in our wide-ranging conversation about wine and food, about

chefs and dinners, while he sighed and squirmed and did his best to talk about anything and everything but himself, we didn't really talk about food. He never mentioned specific dishes, the way some food enthusiasts will. He didn't talk about this chef's biscuits or that chef's pork.

He talked about the people. He talked about the chefs and their families. He spoke about the films and oral histories the SFA has produced and the people they chronicle. He talked about the chefs who donate their time and labor for his auction experiences, the winemakers and importers who offer up their connections and their bottles, the people who bid generously on each item. What he didn't talk about was food.

We know this to be true: If you're with the wrong people, it doesn't matter how good the food or wine is. You won't enjoy the meal. But if you're with friends, a mediocre meal can feel like a feast.

"It's almost six o'clock, Rob," he says, with real annoyance in his voice. "All of these questions ... I really think you're just embarrassing yourself." He looks stern, and then he smiles. It's rosé time. I can't put it off any longer.

"I'm not analytical," he says finally. "I'm not a goal setter. I'm just what's in the moment. I'm just always asking myself, *How can you make sure you're connecting with people?*"

I remind him that earlier that day, as we walked through the Abingdon farmers' market, he said hello to everyone. And then later that afternoon, at the Birthplace of Country Music Museum, he introduced me to every employee in sight. Why is it so important to do that?

He waves me off and points to his

watch and makes a wine-pouring gesture. "Wherever I go," he says, "on vacation or going to a meeting or something like that, walking down the street, I make eye contact with everybody. If they get pissed off, that's their loss."

Then he laughs.

"Even in New York City. If I'm walking in the morning, it's, 'Good morning! How are you doing?' And I don't realize that a lot of these people have these earbuds in their ears. They don't hear you."

"So what do you do then?"

"I look at Linda Riley and I say, 'Damn it, they didn't hear me. Gotta go back.' So I circle back. I circle back and run after them."

For a moment, I think he's serious. (In fact, I still think he's serious.)

A final "Also sprach Zarathustra" moment: Cut to Bramble Hall at Blackberry Farm. Rathead is on fire—the auction is once again breaking records. An intermittent bidder has foolishly made eye contact with Rathead and his tiger-like auction wrangling instincts have kicked in. He is focusing all of his attention on this one bidder, trying to elicit a higher bid for one of his priceless auction lots. He steps off of the platform and walks to her table, microphone in hand. His eyes never leave her eyes. "Don't look at him," he tells her when she looks to her husband for support. "Don't look at him. Look at me. Look at me." He leans in. "Do I have thirty-five?" He asks. She wavers. She hesitates. She starts and stops. And then the dam breaks. She breaks out into laughter and nods and raises her paddle. The audience explodes with joy.

The truth is, up against Rathead Riley, she never had a chance. None of us does. 🍷

Rob Long is a screenwriter and a former president of the SFA board of directors. SFA staff are fond of his early work on Cheers, especially the episode in which Frasier reads A Tale of Two Cities to the bar, inserting a sewer-roaming evil clown into the Dickens classic.