GRAVY

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ISSUE #52

WHERE WE EAT

A QUARTERLY FROM THE
SOUTHERN FOODWAYS ALLIANCE

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COVER PHOTO *by Rush Jagoe.* PHOTO, THIS PAGE *by Jerry Siegel.*

EDITOR'S NOTE

THE HAPPY DESK LUNCH

ON EATING IN THE SFA OFFICE

by Sara Camp Arnold

FROM TIME TO TIME I see references on social media to the sad desk lunch, or specifically the sad desk salad. Many office workers, it seems, equate lunch at work with abject disappointment. I've experienced this phenomenon myself. At a certain point, the offerings in our nearby student union lose their luster, as do the microwavable organic burritos that I once loved. Whether it's a salad, a Tupperware of leftover penne, or a six-inch turkey on wheat with processed cheese triangles, a desk meal can be sad. But in my office, this is the exception. More often than not, sharing a snack or meal reminds me why I love my job.

I am lucky to work with a group of people, mostly women, who truly love food and eating. This shouldn't be surprising given our line of work. Our team is small, and we spend a lot of time together. We're all busy, even a little frenzied, much of the time. But we pause to eat together with a frequency that makes me proud. Donuts for breakfast. Midsummer tomato sandwiches for lunch. Pie for—well, pie is for any time of the day. Sometimes our food falls under the general umbrella of healthy. Other times, not so much. Often, the food we share in our office is homemade. But we've also been known to order pizza.

For the last year or so, I've watch SFA director John T. Edge explore his fascination with eating establishments as political spaces, with a particular eye to lunch counter sit-ins of the 1960s. Inspired by John T.'s curiosity, I dedicated this issue of *Gravy* to the theme of "Where We Eat." I wanted to explore themes of space, place, and architecture as they relate to foodways in the contemporary South. No stories of sad desk salads here. Instead, you'll read about an all-American mid-century burger joint that's now an all-American taqueria. You'll visit an oyster house on the Eastern Shore of Virginia and a seventy-year-old sandwich shop in Jackson, Mississippi. You might end up believing, as I do, that where we eat can matter as much as what we eat.

When I moved from Chapel Hill to Oxford to join the SFA, my colleague Julie Pickett greeted me with a Kroger sheet cake on my first day in the office. Written in icing was the slogan, SFA LOVES SCA. I had come to the right place. That cake (and something is probably wrong with you if you don't get a little giddy at the thought of grocery-store sheet cake) was the first of many meals, desserts, and snacks I would share with my colleagues at our desks or gathered on the armchairs and couches in our open office. We gossip, we laugh, we dream up new ideas. And we pass the pimento cheese, the pork noodles, the lemon icebox pie. There's nothing sad about that.

PHOTO *by Mark Steinmetz.*

CONVERSATION

OLD SPACE, NEW WELCOME TABLE

IN JACKSON, A YOUNG CHEF BUILDS HIS FIRST RESTAURANT ON HISTORY, FAMILY, AND THE TASTE OF PLACE

by Julian Rankin

IF ALL GOES AS PLANNED, Nick Wallace will open his first solo restaurant, Lunette, in 2015. The restaurant will occupy the lobby floor of the James Eastland Federal Building in downtown Jackson, Mississippi. La Poste, a modern bar also conceived by Wallace, will claim the adjacent space, backlit by a grid of old post-office boxes. The Eastland building, named for the late cotton plantation owner and U.S. senator from Mississippi, is being transformed into a multi-use development with apartments on the upper floors above Wallace's dining ventures. Where justice and judgment were once served, Lunette and La Poste will offer house-made pork cracklings, onion-encrusted local lamb, and modern cocktails like the Bloom, a mix of vodka, cucumber, lime, homemade basil syrup, and cardamom bitters.

The young chef knows the building's complicated past. In a fourth-floor courtroom, a New Deal–era mural titled "Pursuits of Life in Mississippi" depicts white men and women playing middle-class roles, while blacks pick cotton and play the banjo. "We had to wipe away, through the concept, all that authority that was present there," says Wallace. "A lot of people in the past did not want to walk in that door. So I have to fix that. I have to clear the air of that authority, because I want everybody to feel at home."

Wallace grew up on the outskirts of Edwards, Mississippi, west of Jackson. "I was the country boy," he says. "Off in the woods, walking through the blueberry bushes, shoes off. I ate dirt as a kid. When I tell you I was living off the soil, I was living off the soil. Because I know what it tastes like."

Back in Edwards, at the home of his uncle and aunt George and Learetha Donald, Wallace walks along the roadside looking for wild garlic. His uncle started with a single plant years back. "You go fishing and they say to put a little garlic on your bait to make the fish bite better," Learetha Donald explains. "He had some left over and he put it out there and it went like wildfire."

Here, Wallace's paternal grandmother, Lennel Donald, raises chickens in a backyard coop. She and her sons seed their expansive gardens with beans, peas, okra, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, and squash. "Farm to table is the new trend," Wallace says. "But that trend has always been in. It hasn't always been talked about, but it's always been the case. Mississippi has been farm to table forever."

Wallace honed his chops in his mother's kitchen. Toward the end of our day together, we head back, hungry, to the Jackson home of his mother, Susie Wallace, and grandmother Queen Morris. When we arrive, the stovetop is crowded with cornbread and chicken and fish and corn. "He was always in there with me," Susie Wallace says. "I didn't know the boy was paying attention. I just thought he was hungry. But he was watching."

As Lunette edges closer to opening, all of Jackson will be watching. The menu will come, but the ethos is already clear. "When family would cook cornbread, they'd always cook more than they needed," says Wallace. "You leave it out and the edges get dry. That's when it ate better. Dip it into the juice of the greens. I'm thinking about a mimic of that. Have a vegetable stock that's served on the table. You dip that cornbread in and it just comes back to life."

Wallace imagines more than a restaurant. He thinks of Lunette as a place to break down barriers in downtown Jackson and forge shared mealtime experiences. He says it's also an exercise in what a Mississippi restaurant can be. "People used to look at me and say, 'Nick, a black guy, he grew up on a farm, he might have chased a pig or two around, he probably should be working at Collins Kitchen or Peaches.'"

Lunette won't be a soul-food joint like Collins or Peaches. Instead, the grand Eastland building will prove a luxe setting for Wallace's ventures. Enter the lobby and you will step into La Poste. Mailboxes once stuffed with light bills and bad news will accent a bar lit with bright promise. Above Lunette's tables, giant skylights will pierce the vaulted ceilings. A rooftop above the dining room will double as an urban garden. Wallace likens the space to a cathedral, with "a big community table here, an open wine bar there, and this big kitchen in the back."

Julian Rankin is the director of media and public relations at the Mississippi Museum of Art. He was the recipient of the 2013-2014 SFA fellowship at Rivendell Writers' Colony.
PHOTOS *by Julian Rankin.*

RECIPE

CAJUN STEAK ARCHER

COOKING WITH SAMBO MOCKBEE

by Carol Mockbee

MY FATHER, Sambo Mockbee, learned to love good food from his dear friend, the architect and chef B.B. Archer. They grew up in Meridian, Mississippi, and Sambo spent a semester with B.B. at the University of Southern Lousiana (now UL) in Lafayette. There BB learned to master Cajun cooking, and Sambo was more than happy to eat everything B.B. prepared.

Years later, B.B. wrote a cookbook, *Cajun Cookery*. One of Sambo's favorite recipes was Cajun Steak Archer. As was typical, Sambo took some poetic license to make the dish his own by adding an unimaginable amount of garlic. And while you can't beat the simple genius of this recipe, we're pretty sure that most people returned to our kitchen because cooking with Sambo was fun. He had an endless supply of Heinekens (the only beer he ever drank), and better yet, an endless supply of stories. Some were true and some weren't, and either way, you always wanted more.

Samuel Mockbee was the co-founder of Auburn University's Rural Studio. He was a MacArthur Fellow recipient in 2000 and posthumously was awarded the American Institute of Architect's Gold Medal in 2004. His daughter Carol Mockbee is program director at the Mississippi Innocence Project at the University of Mississippi School of Law.

RECIPE AND IMAGES *courtesy of the Mockbee family.*

CAJUN STEAK ARCHER

- 4 Delmonico steaks
- Worcestershire sauce
- Monosodium glutamate
- Tabasco sauce
- Cavender's Greek seasoning
- Tony Chachere's Creole seasoning
- Lawrey's seasoned salt
- Garlic salt
- Lemon pepper
- Red (cayenne) pepper
- French's yellow mustard
- 1 lemon
- 1/2 stick melted butter

COVER BOTH SIDES OF STEAKS with Worcestershire and Tabasco sauces, then spice with remaining seasonings. Jab steaks several times per side with a kitchen fork, then spread mustard over both sides of steaks with a butter knife. Cook in oven on broil for 4 minutes per side, basting with lemon juice and melted butter.

Cajun
Steak
Archer

4 Delmonico Steaks
Worcestershire Sauce
Monosodium glutamate
Tabasco Sauce
Cavender's Greek Seasoning
Tony Chacheres Creole Seasoning
Lawrey's Seasoning Salt
Garlic salt
Lemon pepper
Red (cayenne) pepper
French's yellow mustard
1 lemon
1/2 stick melted butter

Cover both sides of steaks with Worcestershire and Tabasco Sauces,

THE BAYFORD OYSTER HOUSE

FOOD, PLACE, AND A PARTY

by Bernie Herman

THE BAYFORD OYSTER HOUSE extends over the shallows of Nassawadox Creek, abutting the channel where the tides of the Chesapeake Bay ebb and flow. The heart of the two-story wood building, erected around 1902, serves seasonally for shedding soft-shell crabs. During the rest of the year it functions as a storage area, stacked with soft-shell crab floats, blue plastic drums crammed with gill nets, and the flotsam of fish and eel traps, blue-crab and peeler pots, floats, line, and salt water–worn hand tools. The creek side of the oyster house fronts a working dock where watermen land their catch. The landward side abuts the one-story shucking hall and office, added when the business was in full swing through the mid 1960s, before disease struck the oyster beds and shucking operations closed. The old post office and store stands next door, remembered by Bayford denizens for its bear-paw sandwich of hard cheddar and rag bologna on a sugar-glazed bun.

There is always a comforting dampness to the oyster house, the scent of salt water and dried fish caught between the dock planks, the sound of current moving against boat hulls punctuated by the rattle and hum of the ice machine and the *shoosh* of passing tires on sand and pavement. Sometimes people stop by for fish or crabs, but most drop-ins come to visit and exchange views on everything from the condition of the Bay to global politics. H.M. Arnold, the oyster house proprietor, maintains a minimal kitchen in the old office, equipped with a countertop deep fryer and a bucket of preserved salt fish. The shucking hall adjacent, with its concrete floors and slant-topped worktables, is increasingly subject to flooding at high tide and during storms. No matter how high a tide might run, the shucking hall is the dining room for the annual September Bayford Oyster House party hosted by H.M. and Mary Lou Arnold, an event that has held sway in this place for the past quarter-century.

Where we eat speaks to an iteration of *terroir* grounded in the places where folks share meals and conversation. More than the taste of place, the *terroir* of where we eat speaks to the experiences of breaking bread and the enlivening practices of knowing place through the presence of our bodies. Place nourishes our understandings of who we are. The power of taste is immersive. When I reflect on where I eat, my thoughts turn to the Eastern Shore of Virginia. Wading creekside and shucking oysters culled from their beds or standing in an orchard plucking finger-soft and sun-warmed figs infuses the soul with salt and light. Sitting at the Exmore Diner counter and savoring a plate of spot fried head-on

and hard, served with greens and a brown sugar–crusted sweet potato, I am aware of how my elbows rest against forearm-burnished steel and Formica surfaces—the bright luster left by folks who have eaten here and the promise of those to come.

Sweating in the hallway of the Glorious Church of Jesus Christ with my friend Pooh Johnston, savoring the heat and smells of the kitchen adjoining the sanctuary, watching the women work at the stove and kitchen table, anticipating our takeaway lunches of clam fritters and pig feet with string beans and potato salad, I consider that where we take our meals reminds us of our tangible place in the world. Where we eat combines place and event. It bridges the everyday and the exceptional occasion. It speaks to a fundamental truism: Events take place, therefore place matters. Where we eat is about the substance of occasion. So it is with the Bayford Oyster House and the annual potluck dinner.

The party transforms the old work building into a one-night palace of culinary delight. Some diners come for the "atmosphere of the old building," but, H.M. Arnold adds, "a lot of them that come though, they grew up here." Slow-roasted venison hams are the centerpiece of the menu, along with homemade sides including crab dip, macaroni and cheese, collards, string beans, and cole slaw. "People just go out of their way to make good stuff," he continues, "My gosh! Food keeps coming until ten o'clock." As guests arrive, they arrange their dishes on the old

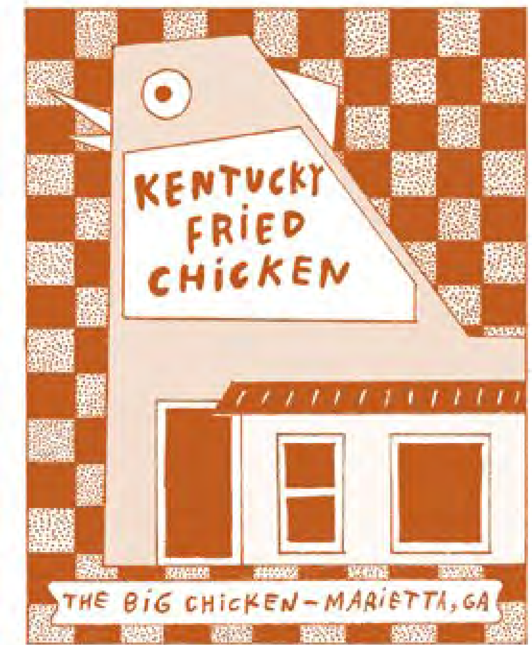
concrete-topped shucking tables. The diners file by, filling their plates as they go. Overhead strings of lights illuminate the proceedings. Talking and drinking, small groups of friends and acquaintances cluster together, politely standing back from the serving line. Outside, the crowd grows, and conversations multiply. New arrivals walk down the hill, enter the oyster house, and pay their respects to the old heads at ease in plastic chairs arranged in something of a receiving line. "They're pretty much gone now," H.M. says with a sigh. "I had a lot of old friends, and they'd sit in here and people would pass by and they'd say, 'Now, who is that? Oh yeah, I knew their granddad. I knew their dad.'"

The dishes shared at the Bayford party are memorable, but it is the being there that matters most. People come in waves, H.M. explains. "You got the early crowd, the older ones.... They all liked to come down and, of course, they would be here first. And, my mother and them would say, 'It's time to eat. It's time to eat!' I'm going, 'Well, the food's not here. The food's not here. If you start too soon, you're going to miss a lot of stuff.' So, I had to hold them off. She'd come back, 'We got to eat. We got to eat!' We used to let them go first and some of them needed help getting their food and stuff. So, I'd do that and then holler out, 'Time to eat!' And then there'd be a line and everybody would get in line and start eating...That crowd would eat and maybe stay around another hour and then you'd have the next age group and they would eat and they would stay around a couple more hours and then you had the next group—the hard core, I call them. They'd already eaten and they're here until—we have been here until one or two o'clock in the morning.... Everybody gets along. They see people they don't see but once or twice a year."

When H.M. Arnold says that people come for the atmosphere, he speaks to a larger truth that place counts as much as what's on the menu. In the case of the Bayford Oyster House the physical setting in and around the old building forms an imaginary mapped in memory, familiarity, and renewal. The Bayford party reminds us that in the worlds of everyday things and associations, place is on the menu. Where we eat is what we eat.

Bernie Herman is the department chair and George B. Tindall Professor of American Studies and Folklore at UNC-Chapel Hill. He lives in Chapel Hill and on the Eastern Shore of Virginia.

PHOTOS *by Bernie Herman.*



EMILY E. WALLACE

ORAL HISTORY

YOU CAN FEEL JACKSON IN THE WALLS

BEATTY STREET GROCERY, JACKSON, MISSISSIPPI

As told to Rien Fertel by Mary Harden

MY GRANDPA WAS A COLONIAL BREAD MAN and he delivered bread to the store that was sitting here. It was an old corner grocery store before Kroger's and all the supermarkets. And he decided to buy the place and he turned it into the sandwich shop that it is today. That happened over about a fifty-year period of time.

My grandfather was born in 1905 and my grandmother was born in 1911. I know he purchased the store with the fixtures that were in it for $250 in July 1940. In 2015, it'll be seventy-five years. This neighborhood was a part of Jackson from the get-go, but in 1940 it was much more removed. It was on the outskirts of town.

There were gravel roads all around at that time and there were only houses, because people were living here rather than being industries around it. The checkout, the railings where you check out, all of that is a part of the original building. My grandfather expanded it in 1948 and put in the countertops that are here today. Back in the 1960s the area started industrializing, and that's about the time that we started selling sandwiches.

It stayed a grocery store probably until the early 1960s. My grandfather had cans of Rick's sausage, and he sold smoked sausage. He would open the cans of sausage and the guys down at Jackson Iron and Metal, the metal processors, they would come down and they would be hungry and he would just make a few sandwiches along. And then he would slice some bologna and he would sell thin cold bologna sandwiches for a dime apiece.

They would come down and they would buy these dime sandwiches and they would eat their sandwiches outside, or they'd sit along the same counters that are here today. They had groceries on them, and they would just sit on the edges of the counters. I have vivid memories of there being fifty, sixty men in here at the same time, eating their sandwiches inside of the store. Or if they had a truck, they'd just park in the parking lot. And they would sit on the tailgates of their trucks and eat them.

I have never remembered it being anything but integrated. My grandparents delivered groceries to white and black alike. I don't have any memories of anything but black and white being here together—working, eating, living.

My parents worked for my maternal grandparents. Dad started working when he was about in the seventh or eighth grade. He had to quit school to support his family so my grandparents hired him, and he and my mother fell in love. He took over when my grandparents became too old to work—they kind of cut back and then they passed away in 1978 and 1980. So my parents had it and now I'm running it after Dad. I'm the third generation.

In the 1960s, my parents were trying to make a transition from being a grocery store to a sandwich shop. Neither my parents nor my grandparents were college-educated people. They were just hard workers. It was a question of, are you going to market to to the blue-collar workers or to the upscale people? I mean, you're selling a dime sandwich, you know? How many do you have to sell to make ends meet? It evolved into what it is.

When my parents decided this was going to be a viable option, they put in a stove back behind the meat market. They would fry the burgers or fry the bologna and they would make them in what was the storage room behind the meat market. They cut a hole through the wall—still there today—and would put the sandwiches through the hole and sell them over the meat counter.

About three years ago I decided that it would be kind of cool for people to be able to eat on the original counters. So I had a carpenter come in and he took the shelves off the bottom parts and he maintained the integrity of the top parts of the counter so that people can eat off of them. Then we bought stools so that we could kind of make it into a sit-down-and-eat restaurant rather than just takeout.

We have everyone from the sanitation workers to former governers that eat with us—side by side. They're all eating on the same countertops and enjoying the same ambiance and atmosphere.

My grandparents would be extremely proud. They would be gratified not only that it's still here but that there are some changes, yet it's kind of the same, too. You walk in and you can still see the same fixtures and same countertops, but yet it has done some changing. They could still recognize it for what it is. I think they would appreciate that.

It's distinctly Mississippi and distinctly Jackson because of what we serve—fried bologna, smoked link sausage sandwiches, burgers. It's just basic, inexpensive, easy, fast, cheap country cooking that's still good. It's reflective of Jackson. You can almost feel Jackson in the walls. Whatever has happened in your life has made you who you are. By that same token, Jackson has made Beatty Street what it is.

PHOTOS *by Rush Jagoe.*

PROFILE

SHE'LL MAKE YOU LUNCH

WHAT MOTHER'S KITCHEN IS, AND ISN'T

by Melissa Dickson

MOTHER'S KITCHEN DOESN'T HAVE WI-FI, specialty coffees, an all-you-can-eat buffet, or a dollar menu. For that matter, it doesn't have a menu. Mother's has a page torn from a spiral-bound notebook with the day's four entrée choices written, sometimes hastily, in pen. Fried chicken is always an option. The list of sides is familiar: black-eyed peas, macaroni and cheese, pinto beans, collards. Mother doesn't ask if you want cornbread or rolls. She plates your lunch with a square of thin cornbread. It's not sweet. It's not hot out of the oven. It's cornbread—practical, functional, understated.

Know this: Your baked chicken will be tender, you won't be sorry you got the collard greens, and your tea will be sweet—maybe too sweet. If you don't want it sweet, you need to ask twice. Mother is busy and she won't hear you the first time.

Lunch will cost you $6.45 unless you get a slice of that pink cake already plated and wrapped in plastic. You'll pay another two dollars for that. You won't write your uncle in Atlanta about that piece of cake. Mother isn't interested in your epicurean aspirations. She's interested in the day to day, what it takes for the long haul. You might want sliced tomatoes and chopped onions with that—most folks do. She'll ask before she forks them out of the plastic container behind the cash register.

Mother doesn't need your love any more than she needs another article written about her tiny kitchen down an alley across from the Coweta County municipal building. She doesn't need a sign, an ad, a p.r. flak, or a fan club. She needs regulars who want a fast lunch, a good lunch, a hot and satisfying lunch. The portions aren't supercharged. The refills of tea will cost a quarter. You'll get a warm hello and a pleasant goodbye, but you won't be encouraged to linger. Mother has work to do; she assumes you do, too.

She's been making lunch for executives, construction workers, retirees, store clerks, lawyers, craftspeople, and migrant workers in Newnan, Georgia, for fourteen years. She doesn't renovate. She doesn't read up on restaurant trends. She doesn't introduce new entrées or redesign the menu. And she doesn't cook soul food. She cooks food the way her mother did, maybe the way your mother or grandmother did. If you need a label, call it country food. Soul food is the word of God, and you'll find it carefully written at the bottom of the list of entrées, a new verse each day. Next to that open container of tomatoes and onions is

an open Bible, the kind your granddaddy might have owned, with a thin black leather cover and gold-trimmed pages, thumbed over and dog-eared.

In a world where restaurateurs consider menu fonts and paint colors as carefully as the arch descriptions of appetizers, Mother's is a holy place, a rare destination—maybe a glimpse of our recent, less-than-glamorous past. But don't get nostalgic. Mother isn't studying that. She doesn't care about cultural norms, social issues, or how you think a restaurant ought to look.

This is how her restaurant looks: The floors are dirt-colored Marmoleum, the kind you remember from your elementary-school cafeteria. The countertops are aging Formica. Winter heat is provided by the open flame of a gas radiator, summer cold by a window unit. The remnants of wallpaper borders speak to the distant priority of decor. So do the favorite quotes, newspaper articles, and pictures thumbtacked to the wall. In a neglected corner an artfully rendered pastel portrait of Mother rests on the floor. A gift from the artist, it's a fine thing, discreetly propped there, nearly hidden by a table. It's as if Mother wants you to know this is her place but it's not about her. It's about lunch. It's about country-fried steak and gravy, black-eyed peas, lima beans, and cornbread.

Mother doesn't care how many degrees you have, who your people are, or which side of town you call home. She doesn't care if you publish essays, or read long novels, or know how to tango. She runs a kitchen, a good kitchen, about which people who don't write poetry write poems.

Melissa Dickson is a poet and mother of four who loves a good salmon croquette. Her work can be found in Bitter Southerner, Cumberland River Review, *and* Shenandoah.

PHOTO, PAGE 20, *by Melissa Dickson.*

PROFILE

BIGGER THAN A HAMBURGER

SCENES FROM THE STUDENT SIT-IN MOVEMENT

PRESIDENT LYNDON JOHNSON signed the Civil Rights Act into law on July 2, 1964. The legislation outlawed segregation in places of public accommodation, including restaurants. Though Johnson receives much of the credit for ending de jure segregation, the Civil Rights Act was the culmination of more than four years of peaceful demonstrations held at restaurants and lunch counters across the United States—not just in the South—and led, in large part, by students at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). What is so striking about this

▲ PREVIOUS PAGE: *Students from Philander Smith College in Little Rock, Arkansas, do their school work during a sit-in at a Woolworth's lunch counter, ca. November 1962. (Copyright Bettman/Corbis/AP Images)*

◄ *Students from St. Augustine's College in Raleigh, North Carolina, participate in a sit-in at a downtown lunch counter on February 10, 1960—just days after the first sit-ins at Woolworth's in nearby Greensboro. (Copyright Bettman/Corbis/AP Images)*

▼ *A woman closes a department-store lunch counter in downtown Memphis, Tennessee, to prevent a young man and woman from sitting down, June 1961. The protestors were most likely students at LeMoyne College or Owen Junior College. (Copyright Bettman/Corbis/AP Images)*

moment in history is how the students carried themselves with such dignity in the face of sometimes violent reactions from their adversaries. Their smart blazers and ties, tailored skirts and blouses, functioned as a sort of sophisticated armor. The leaders of the student movement were disciplined, organized, and professional in their approach, so much so that many people forget how very young they were. Looking at a collection of photos taken at sit-ins from Maryland to Texas, we begin to get a visual—and visceral—sense of the immense significance of the lunch counter. Where we eat is, as activist Ella Baker put it, "bigger than a hamburger."

▲ *Police arrest two students from Wiley College in Marshall, Texas, for sitting in at the lunch counter of a downtown Marshall drugstore in the spring of 1960. (Copyright Bettman/Corbis/AP Images)*

▲ *Police detectives remove an African American man from Hooper's restaurant in Baltimore, Maryland, on November 12, 1961. More than 30 were arrested in Baltimore that day for participating in a series of sit-ins at local restaurants. (AP Photo/William A. Smith)*

▲ *On May 28, 1963, Tougaloo College professor James Salter and Tougaloo students Joan Trumpauer and Anne Moody sit in at the lunch counter of Woolworth's in Jackson, Mississippi. White opponents of integration beat Salter over the head and sprayed him with condiments. (Copyright Bettman/Corbis/AP Images)*

EL SUR

LA FONDA

COMIDA AUTÉNTICA IN FORT PAYNE, ALABAMA

by Abigail Greenbaum

IN MEXICO CITY, where Esteban Rojo spent the early part of his life, "la fonda" is the term for a certain kind of restaurant. A small place, he explains, pausing to consider how to translate *comida auténtica* into English: "home food."

A meal at Rojo's La Fonda in Fort Payne, Alabama, begins, as *comida auténtica* often does, with fried tortilla chips, still hot and gleaming with oil, and a small bowl of house-made roasted jalapeño salsa. La Fonda's building, a brightly colored and whimsical A-frame, preserves the architectural legacy of the classic American drive-in restaurant. It is an unexpected pairing. But the styles blend well—a vibrant serape hanging from the wall complements the colorful chairs from the original restaurant.

La Fonda occupies the building that Jack Locklear opened in 1963 as Jack's Hamburgers, a drive-in and dine-in restaurant so popular that Locklear often needed a cop to help him manage the traffic. A Fort Payne native, Locklear played center and linebacker for Auburn and was drafted by the Cleveland Browns. Instead of joining the pros, he returned home to open a restaurant. "He was always a cook," says his daughter Lynn Locklear Brewer. "We were always grilling out."

Rojo rents the building from the Locklear family, who kept the property after Jack Locklear passed away in 2012. While some interior touches are clearly Rojo's—sombreros, the *santo*-style Jesus statue, the horchata machine—the painted trim, curbs, and siding recall the original burger joint. When he had to replace the terra cotta roof, Jack Locklear made sure that the metal, still in use today, mimicked the crimson of the tile. The Locklears have rebuilt the restaurant at least twice—once after a grease fire sent the grill area up in flames, and another time in the 1970s when a tornado touched down in Fort Payne. (The staff took shelter in the walk-in cooler.)

When Rojo leased the restaurant in 2005, he was more excited about the building's downtown location than the architecture. La Fonda is within walking distance from several of Fort Payne's sock mills, the town's primary employers. At first, the majority of his clients were immigrants from Mexico and Central America who worked in the hosiery industry. Several mills closed in the economic downturn, but business did not slow at La Fonda. By then, it had grown popular with a diverse clientele. On special occasions like Mother's Day and birthdays, Rojo often bakes Jack Locklear's widow a tres leches cake.

In 2010, more than one-fifth of Fort Payne residents identified as Hispanic or Latino, making Fort Payne's community five times larger than the statewide percentage. A stack of copies of *LATINO Alabama*, a Spanish newspaper, sits by an aloe plant in the dining room. In 2011, the state enacted HB 56, the toughest immigration law in the country. Some of its strictest provisions, such as the criminalization of giving a ride to an undocumented immigrant, have been gutted by a federal court. Rojo says that he's never had anti-immigrant problems at La Fonda, and that Fort Payne, perhaps due to its larger Latino population, is a tolerant place. There's a poster for a Tea Party rally up in the window. Though Rojo has no interest in the rally or the Tea Party, he leaves the poster hanging. "Some customer put that up," he shrugs and smiles.

Rojo's devotion to customer satisfaction explains why he never used the drive-in speakers that were once set up in the parking lot. "More personal than Sonic's," he says. "If someone isn't happy with the food, I want to see it." Rojo has changed some menu items, in name anyway, to adapt to the local environment. His flautas translate, on the menu, as "fried tacos." Explaining this choice, Rojo switches into English. "This is the South," he says. "Always fried." Rojo also serves hamburgers, a nod to Jack's.

Rojo's own favorite is the torta chilanga, a sandwich he learned to prepare in Mexico City. He bakes the oversized telera bread daily. The texture is light enough to soak up the guajillo pepper–infused grease and solid enough to hold in the pastor pork, grilled pineapple, grilled ham, avocado, queso fresco, yellow cheese, and mozzarella.

Leaving La Fonda, I wonder how to reconcile *comida auténtica*: the breads and salsas of Rojo's Mexico City, the tastes and structures of the Locklears' American main street. Historic preservation can sometimes be an ugly business, a coded way of fighting demographic change. Some things need tearing down, like the WHITES ONLY sign that hung, Lynn Locklear Brewer reminds me, on the original door of Jack's. But at La Fonda, the effort to preserve an American burger joint is a more complicated, cooperative, and carefully seasoned enterprise.

Abigail Greenbaum's writing has appeared or is forthcoming in Ecotone, Free State Review, *and* Creative Loafing Atlanta. *Alyssa Bishop and Raven Wilson assisted the author with interpretation and translation for this piece.*
PHOTOS *by Raven Wilson.*

EDUCATION

WATCHING WHAT WE EAT

ON THE COMPLICATED POLITICS OF THE SCHOOL CAFETERIA

by Kat Kinsman

ANGELA HASSON PULLED ME ASIDE IN THE LUNCHROOM to tell me that everyone thought my family was poor. This was news to me. So far as I could tell, my sister and I didn't look anything like the barefoot, swollen-bellied children on the sides of the UNICEF cartons into which we slipped spare pennies. Nor did anyone attempt to gift us with sacks of half-eaten sandwiches, the likes of which our Grandmother Ribando said starving Armenian children would be most grateful to have. (*Clean your plates, girls. Clean your plates.*)

I pressed her for evidence and she relished the words, tumbling them around in her mouth like a disc of butterscotch before spitting them out on her Jell-O dish: "My mom says it's weird that your mom wraps your sandwiches in Saran Wrap instead of a Ziploc. And why do you always have carrot sticks and a couple of potato chips when we all have cookies? Did your dad lose his job or something?"

I bought my lunch for the rest of sixth grade, making sure to spring for the chocolate milk instead of white — extra nickel be damned (and sorry, faraway UNICEF urchins). It's not that I especially enjoyed the grey-meated burgers and leathery green beans slopped on my plate by a rotating cast of conscripted parents, but I loathed the notion that my peers thought they could infer anything personal from my lunch tray.

This was not a luxury afforded the students of my husband's public high school in High Point, North Carolina. Each morning, as homeroom teachers called roll, students were forced to make a public declaration of the state of their family's finances.

"Jasper?" "Present."

"Jenkins?" "I get a free lunch."

"Johnson?" "I ain't getting milk."

The milk refusal, it should be noted,

was not a proto-PETA stance or a finger in the face of classroom posters touting the bone-building benefits of dairy. It was an almost punitive jab at the poorest kids who couldn't afford the ten cents for a beverage to accompany their school-provided lunch. And a good morning to you, students. Happy learning.

THE SCHOOL CAFETERIA IS A NOBLE CONCEPT that has often failed the young people who visit it each day. In theory, a communal feeding space for children should be a breeding ground for well-nourished bon vivants of the future. In my utopian dreams, the wee bairns would populate a different round table each day, busting up any chance of cliques, accommodating eaters of all paces and family income levels and celebrating the cuisines of each eater's people.

"Today, we're all going to have Isabelle's family's favorite American chop suey. Yes, Justin, I know it looks like your family's Johnny Marzetti, and Ashleigh, like your mom's chili mac, but Izzy's dad puts paprika in theirs just like his mom and her mom did, and that's OK. Try it."

But that's not how it works—or at least it didn't a few decades back, and that's why my friend Devna Shukla ended up eating her lunch in the bathroom. She wrote in an *Eatocracy* essay that, as the only girl of color at a school in an otherwise blonde-and-blue Ohio suburb, Indian food was for home enjoyment, and PB&J was for public consumption. That is, until the day that her mother packed a kachori in her lunchbox.

Savoring her favorite "outside of school" treat in front of friends would further the cultural rift she was so determined to seam, but she could not deny the deliciousness of the spicy little balls of mung beans and gram flour that were her birthright. So she made a decision she regrets to this very day: Rather than sharing this small taste of her culture at the cafeteria table with her friends, she crept to the girls' room and ate it in a stall.

Given America's current obsession with—and fetishizing of—many cultures' cuisines, the irony of that cafeteria clash was not lost on Devna or on the dozens of commenters who shared their own school eating experiences on that story and a follow-up post I wrote called "The Kid with the Stinky Lunch."

A self-identified "American Hispanic citizen" told of being too poor to afford bread, peanut butter, or jelly, and being taunted at school for bringing tacos as lunch. "We were embarrassed so we used to hide the taco in the brown paper bag, small bites so no one could see the taco. They would make fun of us."

Another commenter, Lisa, recalled bringing Greek salt-cured olives to school with her salami-on-rye sandwiches, wrapped in waxed paper instead of plastic baggies. "The kids would scream, 'You're eating prunes, *ewwwww*!'" In her house, the word for mustard was "senapé," a colloquial northern Italian term, so she asked for that on the first hot dog day at her Catholic school. Her peers took note. Again.

Diana experienced similar taunts from her schoolmates. Not only did she grow up feeling like a bit of an outsider for bringing Macedonian baked goods like zelnik with leeks and feta cheese to school, but her father worked at a paper bag manufacturing company and was allowed to bring home the "irregular," slightly oversized, waxy white bags. "I didn't think anything of it until one day someone joked that I brought a big bag of donuts to lunch. Oh how I wished for a bologna sandwich and a juice box in a brown paper bag!"

Maybe cafeteria politics and proclivities have changed in the decades since I've been in school. I'm a forty-one-year-old mother of none and would be hard-pressed to find an excuse to manifest in a lunchroom without it being kinda creepy. I know, as a journalist and a follower of food politics, that the most pressing current issue for children is one of healthy caloric intake. I also know, as a human, that I want cultural and economic acceptance at the lunch table wrapped into the meal and served up alongside the rest of the day's lessons.

Kat Kinsman is the managing editor of CNN Eatocracy.
PHOTO, PAGE 34, *by Mark Steinmetz*.

DIRECTOR'S CUT

LEARNING TO LOVE THE STRIP-MALL SOUTH

I FELL HARD FOR BUFORD HIGHWAY

by John T. Edge

I GREW UP IN THE COUNTRY. On fourteen acres of red Georgia clay, cut by gullies and skirted by cedars. I grew up fishtailing down gravel roads in pick-ups. And running barefoot through honeysuckle patches. Out in those boonies, I developed an urban crush. After a fitful college run through Athens, I hightailed it for Atlanta and made a life in a neighborhood near the city core.

I could walk to two Indian restaurants, a bookstore, and a co-op grocery. I pinch-hit on the softball team of my neighborhood bar. I became the worst sort of city snob: an arriviste. I was quick to dismiss my country birth and even quicker to declaim life in the white-flight suburbs, which I considered a homogeneous wasteland, absent of sentient folk and sidewalks.

But then I fell hard for Buford Highway, the multicultural corridor that spirals north out of the city, from the strip-mall suburbs to the mega-mall exurbs. A five-lane gauntlet of nail salons, taquerias, foot massage parlors, dim sum houses, squat apartment complexes, and pupusa drive-thrus, Buford Highway, like much of suburban Atlanta, was built for whites escaping blacks. Now colonized by new immigrants, it's a salad bowl suburb, in the parlance of Charlotte historian Tom Hanchett, a kind of culinary Pangaea where Korea abuts Mexico and Vietnam snuggles up to Bosnia.

You have to look with fresh eyes to see the beauty in the strip-mall South. But it's there. In double-decker shopping centers, once anchored by Circuit City and Toys R Us, now home to big-box international groceries that sell fresh mullet for a buck-fifty a pound. At two-story barbecue temples, fronted by mirrored planes of glass, where Korean women cook beef short ribs over charcoal braziers. At Chinese cafés where Guatemalan cooks work back-of-the-stove pots and fryer baskets, boiling star anise–perfumed peanuts and turning out gingered catfish. In the suburbs of Atlanta and Charlotte, in Houston and Little Rock, in Jacksonville and Richmond, the newest of New Souths awaits.

PHOTO *by Kate Medley.*

ABOUT GRAVY

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DOCUMENT

STUDY

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THE MISSION of the Southern Foodways Alliance is to document, study, and celebrate the diverse food cultures of the changing American South.

We set a common table where black and white, rich and poor—all who gather—may consider our history and our future in a spirit of reconciliation.

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UPCOMING

JULY 13–14:
Stir the Pot, Raleigh, North Carolina
Hosted by Ashley Christensen with guest chefs Andy Ticer and Michael Hudman

SEPTEMBER 25–26:
"Redefining the Welcome Table"
Graduate Student Conference, University of Mississippi

OCTOBER 23–26:
17th Southern Foodways Symposium, University of Mississippi
Featuring Ta-Nehisi Coates, Chris Shepherd, and other speakers and chefs

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