Courtesy David Shields

CONJURING FLAVORS FROM MUSTY PAGES

HOW ONE POLYMATH IS HELPING TO REWRITE SOUTHERN CUISINE

by Hanna Raskin

David Shields in a field of flowering benne

When I made plans to meet David Shields in downtown Charleston, he warned me that he'd have to leave by 6 p.m. He had a prior engagement at a bowling alley.

My intention was to save the tough questions for our meeting. But I had to ask: What business did he have in a bowling alley 115 miles from home?

"Would it surprise you to learn that I am a high-stakes bowling sharp that snookers young vain ten-pin amateurs for $$$?" the University of South Carolina professor e-mailed back. No, it wouldn't. Not at all.

Actually, he was an expected guest at his wife Luci's office party. Shields is an excellent party guest who can converse in polished paragraphs on almost any topic: He's an authority on Russian piano music, a black belt in karate, and a renowned scholar of silent movie still photography. Like his bow ties and brick of a cell phone, Shields's mishmash interests seem to come from an earlier time, when men of means spent their days memorizing poetry and doing calisthenics.

There's nothing dilettantish about Shields's pursuits. A decade ago, he teamed up with Glenn Roberts of Anson Mills to parlay a longstanding interest in early American food culture into the restoration of a Southern crop system that developed around the commodification of rice: They envisioned bringing back the Sea Island white flint corn, Charleston Wakefield cabbages, and red sieva beans that nourished coastal rice fields and the people who farmed them. The Carolina Gold Rice Foundation now resembles a kind of Justice League of the Countryside, with Roberts as pitchman, Stephen Kresovich of Clemson University as scientist, Brian Ward of the Clemson Coastal Research and Education Center as grower, and Shields as historian—albeit one who happily wanders into freshly plowed fields.

The Southern food universe is expanding because of Shields's meticulous scholarship. "David declared he would produce world-class historic documentation to guide the revival of Carolina rice cuisine," Roberts recalls. "No one anticipated the scope of his grand vision. His commitment to historic integrity has given birth to paradigm shifts in prevailing interpretations of Southern culinary history."

Shields started his work by reading nineteenth-century agricultural journals. Over three years, he read them all, producing a master list of South Carolina's provision crops, companion crops, and cash crops in the era before industrial agriculture. Shields charged through the dense texts swiftly, tapping into an inherited aptitude for lexical speed: His father, an editor and sometime-CIA operative who spoke in puns, typed three times faster than most professional secretaries.

"When I have a project, I work unceasingly until it's done," Shields says. "I don't have rituals; I don't have to have a sharpened pencil. I just bang it out." (To the background sounds of Soviet symphonies if he's facing a deadline; punk-pop Nobunny or electropop MØ if he's transcribing new ideas.) "I have a really good attention span. I think getting married helped."

Shields married Lucinda Emley in 1980. They were classmates at the College of William & Mary, but didn't start dating until after their five-year class reunion. "We all went dancing," Shields says. "She didn't realize I could dance. And I mean I could really dance." Emley was then studying piano performance at the Eastman School of Music; she later became the first female

stockbroker in Charleston.

At home, Shields is the designated cook. His curiosity about food dates back at least to his undergraduate days, when he pressed the Colonial Williamsburg gardeners to explain cardoons, a spiny, celery-like plant that he didn't recognize. Since then, he's gone through phases: An intense period of Thai cooking in the 1990s followed a "wok moment" in the 1980s. "I guess my fantasy was if I could cook in a wok, I could be a professional," he says.

He never achieved that dream, exactly. Yet his work is on nightly display in restaurants from New Orleans to New York City. At Saison in Richmond, Adam Hall wedges pickled oyster mushrooms and spicy gochujang sauce into a bowl of Carolina Gold rice, produced according to methods Shields pried from musty books. At Old Village Post House in Mt. Pleasant, South Carolina, Forrest Parker decorates triggerfish crudo with African runner peanuts, tracked down by Shields sixty years after seed searchers wrote off the crop as forever lost.

And at Husk in Charleston, diners mark the last hot weeks of summer with compressed and salted wedges of Bradford watermelon, a fugitive heirloom that nearly drove Shields to hopelessness. With Shields's support, the melon's heretofore unknown guardian, Nat Bradford, collected all of the seeds segregated out during the brandy-making process at High Wire Distilling,

Kate Medley

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hinting at the economic potential of Shields's findings for South Carolina producers.

"They're like books," Shields says of the chestnuts and sorghums and beans he's helped usher back into existence. "They embrace entire cultures. They've got to be preserved at all costs."

The wish list of crops that Shields and Roberts compiled isn't merely an index of every forgotten cultivar Shields encountered in his research. They very deliberately focused only on fruits, vegetables, and grains that reportedly tasted good, succeeded in the nineteenth-century marketplace, and differ substantially from what's now available.

As his recent book *Southern Provisions: The Creation & Revival of a Cuisine* makes clear, Shields brooks no sentimentality when it comes to bygone varietals. A mention on an 1859 menu doesn't automatically qualify a field pea for a callback. But if delegates to a farmers' congress that year delivered lengthy testaments to the pea's superior flavor, Shields would e-mail Kresovich about the logistics of restoration.

"The interesting thing about aesthetics is if something had the capacity to provoke human pleasure at any point in any time, it should be able to do so at a later point in time," Shields says. "We can listen with great satisfaction to Vivaldi's Four Seasons. It's not the classical music that's being written now. It's not the popular music that's being written now. But its capacity to charm the ear is great."

In ten years, Shields predicts, the Carolina Gold Rice Foundation will have brought back every crop in the sphere of flavor built around rice. The latest project is purple straw wheat, which Shields had to free from a web of misapplied names. He's also chasing the Hick's mulberry and Duke cherry, both of which will be chronicled on The Old Southern Orchard, a comprehensive website he's building.

"After I got tenure, I decided that I would develop an expertise for each one of my senses," Shields says. "I have to save one for when I retire, and that will be smell: Eventually, I'm going to do a history of the perfume trade. But right at the moment, it's taste. This is a critical moment in the history of food."

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