



# Gravy

"I'm selling my pork chops, but I'm giving my gravy away." - Memphis Minnie

Number 11, Summer 2003

News from the Southern Foodways Alliance

## The Great PC Competition

The Southern Foodways Alliance, the Southeast Dairy Association, and the Web site [www.ilovecheese.com](http://www.ilovecheese.com) are seeking pimento cheese recipes and recollections. Tell us about how your mother always hand-grated her cheese. Let the world know about how your father's homemade mayonnaise made all the difference. Tell us a story of 100 or so words about what pimento cheese has meant to you and your people. Include a recipe and please detail the recipe's provenance.

E-mail submissions to [sfmail@olemiss.edu](mailto:sfmail@olemiss.edu). Deadline for entries is July 31. Three finalists will be announced on August 31. The winner will receive a free trip to the Southern Foodways Symposium, to be held October 2-5 in Oxford, Mississippi.

But wait, there's more: In addition to receiving a monster jar of pimentos and a wheel of delicious sharp cheddar cheese, the winner can take pride in knowing that chef Louis Osteen will feature his or her recipe on the menu at Louis's at Pawley's for the month of November. Questions should be directed to the Southern Foodways Alliance at 662-915-5993.



## MEMBER NEWS

If you have news or projects you'd like to let other SFA members know about, please e-mail them to Tom Head at [thomashead@thomashead.com](mailto:thomashead@thomashead.com). Please keep submissions to about 50 words.

**Joan Nathan** is working on a book for Alfred A. Knopf on American food in the last 30 years. She is particularly interested in talking to people whose work as food innovators or adapters has had an influence on American cooking. She would appreciate suggestions. E-mail her at [nathan4221@aol.com](mailto:nathan4221@aol.com).

*A Chef & His Library*, the recent exhibition that SFA board member **Matt Rowley** curated for the University of Pennsylvania, has now found an afterlife online. The exhibition traces cookery influences on **Fritz Blank**, chef de cuisine of Deux Cheminées in Philadelphia and an SFA member, as reflected in his personal culinary library of more than 10,000 cookbooks, plus other cookery ephemera, such as menus, recipe pamphlets, and photos. *A Chef & His Library* is located at [www.library.upenn.edu/exhibits/rbm/chef/index.html](http://www.library.upenn.edu/exhibits/rbm/chef/index.html).

SFA member **Jimmy Hagood** is looking for help to catalog the recipes of Miss Pearl McPhail, who has worked in the kitchen of the Carolina Yacht Club in Charleston for 39 years. Miss Pearl is described as a "lowcountry cook extraordinaire." According to Jimmy, she has "multiple duffel bags of recipes going back decades." Jimmy hopes that the cataloging of the recipes will result in a book published for Miss Pearl's benefit. Jimmy's e-mail address is [jimmyhagood@tidewaterfood.com](mailto:jimmyhagood@tidewaterfood.com).

## SFA Field Trip Explores Appalachian Food

The rich tradition of Appalachian food is the theme of the third annual Southern Foodways Alliance Field Trip, August 1-3, 2003, hosted by the Biltmore Estate in Ashville, North Carolina. The itinerary includes a behind-the-scenes tour of Biltmore Estate's agricultural programs, its vineyards and winery operations, and its kitchens; a discussion of Southern wines and wineries with a tasting; and tours of local farms and markets.

And of course, there's food: a game dinner at the Biltmore

estate, an Appalachian Iron Skillet competition sponsored by the North Carolina SweetPotato Council and Lodge Manufacturing; and one of White Lily's famous breakfasts. Along the way, you might even learn to clog.

SFA's Field Trips always sell out early. To register, e-mail Manda Palomares at [sfa2003@biltmore.com](mailto:sfa2003@biltmore.com) or phone 828-231-9092. Registration is \$245 for SFA members. A special rate of \$135 per night has been arranged at the Inn on the Biltmore Estate. For information and reservations, call 828-231-9092.

[www.southernfoodways.com](http://www.southernfoodways.com)

662-915-5993

[sfmail@olemiss.edu](mailto:sfmail@olemiss.edu)

## P'minnuh Cheese: The Pâté of the South

### Adrian Miller Is New Board Member

New to the SFA Board is Adrian Miller who, upon the resignation of Tim Patridge, has been tapped to complete his term. Adrian received an A.B. degree in International Relations from Stanford University in 1991 and a J.D. degree from Georgetown University Law Center in 1995. He lives in his hometown of Denver, Colorado, where he is the General Counsel and Director of Outreach for The Bell Policy Center. Adrian traces his Southern roots by bloodlines rather than residence. He was raised on Southern food cooked by his Tennessee mother and his Arkansas father. Adrian is currently researching a culinary history of African Americans.

### Feeding A Yen: Savoring Local Specialties from Kansas City to Cuzco.

By Calvin Trillin. Random House, \$22.95.

"Despite my occasional rants, I never truly qualified as a barbecue purist. A purist, it turns out, is seriously interested in whether or not the proprietor of a barbecue joint chops his own wood. I was reminded of this, and of a lot more barbecue lore, at a gathering in Oxford, Mississippi, referred to by some of its participants as the Barbecue Summit—officially, the 2002 Southern Foodways Symposium."



Pimento cheese, or "P.C.," was born in the South. It's been fundamental to our bridge luncheons, picnic baskets, kids' lunchboxes, afternoon teas, lunch counter menus, and light suppers since at least 1915. You might meet a Southerner who doesn't care for it, but you'll never meet one who doesn't know what it is. The most popular sandwich consumed at the Masters Tournament in Augusta, Georgia, available for a mere \$1.25? Of course—pimento cheese on white bread, wrapped, naturally, in green waxed paper.

How did this simple spread made of grated cheese and little red things, usually bound with mayonnaise and perhaps sparked with an extra spice or two, come to mean so much to so many Southerners? Let's start with the little red things.

The pimiento pepper is red, sweet, and heart-shaped. We know pimientos as olive-stuffers, studders of meat-product loaf, and of course for their partnership with cheese, but it should be noted that the pimiento is also often used to make paprika. "Pimiento," Spanish for "pepper," became Americanized to "pimento," which is now the most common spelling. Georgia leads the United States in growth and production of the pepper.

The moment of harmonious convergence of the humble pimento and sharp cheese remains a mystery, but we do know that already-prepared spread was featured in Southern grocery stores as early as 1915. Pomona Products Company founder George Reigel of Griffin, Georgia, began canning Sunshine Pimentos in 1916, making it even easier for home cooks to produce their own versions of it. Some food historians suggest that pimento cheese was a special treat for families at the turn of the 20th century, since sharp cheddar cheese was store-bought

and not made at home. During the 1920s and 1930s, the economical food became even more of a staple in the South.

P.C. is woven into the fabric of many Southern memories. Most aficionados agree that only sharp cheese will do, but the glue for the spread varies. Recipes call for mayonnaise or milk or buttermilk or eggs or cottage cheese. Some say not to drain your pimientos and to use that juice. Others use lemon or sweet pickle juice. Some really experimental folks use cream cheese. But that sounds a little Yankeeified. People put cream cheese on bagels, for God's sake.

Even the coming together of the P.C. is up for debate. Versions call for using a blender, a whisk, a hand mixer, a fork, or your hands. Some add Tabasco, onions, or jalapeno peppers. Elvis's favorite recipe purportedly calls for Worcestershire sauce, and native North Carolinian author Reynolds Price adds garlic to the concoction that was the "peanut butter of [his] childhood."

Why do we love it so? Well, it's easy to make, it's cheap, and it tastes great. It doesn't make soft white bread go soggy, and it keeps well. It's good between two slices of bread, lining a rib of celery, packed into a cherry tomato, or perched on a cracker. It's heaven on a hamburger or a hot dog. Or eaten with a spoon right out of the crock.

C. D. Wright summed up our relationship with pimento cheese in her poem "Personals": "Since 1971 or before, I have hunted a bench where I could eat my pimento cheese in peace."

That's what pimento cheese can mean, however your grandmother made it: a little comfort, a little memory, a lot of peace. Dig in.

KENDRA MYERS

## Arkansas Wine: Making Do and Doing Well

In the well-established hierarchy of wine, there are countries and regions, like Burgundy, Bordeaux, Napa, and Sonoma, that are famous throughout the world. Their wine is made from grapes that are equally famous—varieties of *vitis vinifera*, the family that includes Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay, Merlot, and other well-known varieties.

So where does a winery in Arkansas that uses native American and hybrid grapes fit into things? Quite nicely, thank you.

"When the climate or the soil isn't conducive or you have to worry about disease resistance, then you have to make do with what you have," says Paul Post, one of eight brothers and sisters who run the Post Familie Vineyards in Altus, in the Arkansas River Valley in northwestern part of the state. The winery's origins precede the 20th century, and its current incarnation dates from 1951 and Matthew Post, Paul's father and the fourth generation of Posts in the area.

Much of Post's wine is made from native grapes like the Norton and Concord, grapelike fruit such as the muscadine, and hybrid grapes (so called because they're crosses between native grapes and *vinifera*) like the Vidal and the Seyval Blanc. Natives and hybrids are much more difficult grapes to work with, and too many wineries pile on sugar to cover up a wild, almost foxy

kind of flavor. But when they're done well, a Norton or Seyval Blanc can wax just as poetic as a Cabernet.

And the Posts have had that kind of success. One of the most recent highlights came at the prestigious *Dallas Morning News* Wine Competition this spring, when a \$6 Post Vidal Blanc (an off-dry white that fits somewhere between a Riesling and a Sauvignon Blanc) won a bronze medal.

In this, they are part of a large and almost unknown regional wine industry throughout the South (and the U.S.). Wine is produced in as many as 49 states; not only does it not all taste like California Chardonnay, it's not supposed to. There are intriguing and very well-made wines from states such as Virginia, North Carolina, and Missouri that, unfortunately, antiquated liquor laws make almost impossible to find outside of the home states.

Yet none of this seems to bother the Posts too much.

"Part of the reason we keep doing it is the family tradition," says Paul, whose family's winery produces 50,000 cases a year—not much by Beringer standards, but the most in Arkansas. "It's deep in our roots. We grew up planting and picking grapes. Yes, it is hard work, but it also taught us a lot of things, and we've learned to appreciate it."

JEFF SIEGEL



*The Cornbread Book:  
A Love Story with Recipes.*

By Jeremy Jackson. William Morrow, \$14.95.

Yes, the Cornbread book. And for the grammarians out there, sit tight, this isn't a typo! In fact, it is the reason for the book, or at least that's the author's hook. Author Jeremy Jackson passionately believes that "corn bread" should be one word, and his goal is to have Merriam-Webster and as many people as he can convince to shell out \$14.95—take note of cornbread. He also wants to find a wife. Yes, a wife. Mixed metaphors, stream-of-consciousness prose, and even unclear priorities (for the book) make this recipe book so different from other cookbooks. If you have a slightly left-of-center personality like I do, it's also what makes it so engaging. Iowa-based Jackson is neither Southern nor a certified chef, but he did hail from corn-raising, corn-eating folks and that does give him some credibility. He's done his research, got his momma to help with the cookin' and the recipe testing, and he's woven it all into a book that at the very least gives cornbread its due. Plus he reads like the kinda guy you'd want to sit down and listen to while nibbling on Uppity Cornmeal Crepes "cornbread" and sipping some whiskey.

ELIZABETH KARMEL

*The Kentucky Mint Julep.*

By Col. Joe Nickell. University Press of Kentucky, \$12.00.

A second slim volume published by a university press has joined the library of mint julep lore. The first was Richard Barksdale Harwell's charmingly digressive book *The Mint Julep*, published by the University Press of Virginia in 1975. Harwell, a Virginian published by a Virginia press, concludes that "clearly the mint julep originated in the northern Virginia tidewater, spread soon to Maryland, and eventually all along

the seaboard and even to transmontane Kentucky." Harwell's treatment of the subject may be more scholarly, but Colonel Nickell's is more practical. He concedes that, technically, bourbon was probably first distilled in Virginia—Kentucky was, after all, originally a part of Virginia—but it is Kentucky that has made both bourbon and the mint julep its own. As early as 1816 Kentuckians were awarding julep cups as prizes at county fairs, and mint juleps have been served at Churchill Downs since the inception of the Kentucky Derby in 1875—reportedly made from mint that grew conveniently in back of the clubhouse.

Nickell's book is a fascinating compilation of julep lore, even touching on the theory that the real cause of the Civil War was "some Yankee coming down south and putting nutmeg in a julep." Without coming to any definite conclusion about whether the mint should be crushed, it concludes with about 20 julep recipes, including a couple of unlikely nonalcoholic versions. This heretical notion aside, Colonel Nickell's book is a useful contribution to the lore of the julep and the drinking habits of the South.

THOMAS HEAD

*Gullah Home Cooking  
the Daufuskie Way.*

By Sallie Ann Robinson. University of North Carolina Press, \$22.50 cloth, \$15.95 paper.

In 1969 Pat Conroy spend a year as a teacher on Daufuskie Island off the coast of South Carolina. Sallie Ann Robinson was one of his students. Conroy talks about this book with great pride and promises that "it will teach you how to eat much better than you did before you read it." Robinson's book will certainly do that, but it will also give you a vivid picture of life on an island that until recently retained its traditional culture. The recipes are divided into four parts: the Garden, the River, the Yard, and the Woods—the sources of food on Daufuskie Island. The Garden gave such delicacies as her grandmother's Smokin' Joe Butter Beans. The River yielded ingredients for fried crab stew and catfish and shrimp mull, served over rice or grits. From the Yard come pork chops, oxtails with ham hocks, fried chicken, and barbecue turkey wings. The Woods yield up venison, smuttered rabbit, and squirrel stew. "Food is life," Robinson

reminds us. "And the way we lived, life was gathering, growing, and preparing food." Pat Conroy has every reason to be proud of this wonderful book.

THOMAS HEAD

*The Ultimate Gullah Cookbook.*

By Jesse Eward Gantt, Jr., and Veronica Davis Gerald. Sands Publishing, \$21.00.

Jesse Gantt is a descendent of a family that left the Carolina lowcountry after the Civil War, but in 1998, he returned to St. Helena Island in Beaufort County and opened an award-winning restaurant called Ultimate Eating. Veronica Davis Gerald, who teaches in the English department at Coastal Carolina University in Conway, South Carolina, traces her ancestry to Waccamaw Neck near Georgetown, South Carolina. She has won many awards for her work in the preservation of Gullah culture. Together, they have produced a book that is a compendium not only of Gullah recipes but of Gullah culture. Gullah cooking, the recipes demonstrate, is "about ancestral ties and American living, adaptability and making do, creativity and survival, livin' ot da waddah and on the lan'." Rice is ever-present. One-pot meals date back to the communal cooking traditions of Africa and the necessity of pooling small amounts for food. Sprinkled throughout the book are Gullah proverbs, food lore, and anecdotes that illustrate the persistence of Gullah culture. In about 1935, Rosa Sullins of Georgia described harvest time: "Harvest wus alluz a big time. Ebrybody bring some ub duh fus crop tuh duh church an we prepeahs a big feas. We pray an gib tanks fuh duh crop an pray fuh duh nex yeah. We all eat an sing an dance." We give thanks to Mr. Gantt and Professor Gerald for their loving picture of this way of life. For information on how to purchase this book, call 843-488-4092 or e-mail [ultimategullah@hotmail.com](mailto:ultimategullah@hotmail.com).

THOMAS HEAD



## South Georgia Cheese: A Story of Love and the Internet

So, exactly how does a lactose-intolerant South Georgia dairy farmer become a renowned artisan cheese-maker? Desiree Wehner's formula includes (1) never tasting a cheese she liked until she was in her late twenties; (2) taking a life-changing trip to Milan, where she learned that cheese wasn't just "the stuff you peeled from a plastic envelope"; and (3) first attempting to make cheese at home in her refrigerator with her grade-school-age son as co-conspirator. "We fed a lot of cheese to the dogs," she says.

Today, Desiree and husband, Al, are expanding their offices and cheese-making facility at Sweet Grass Dairy outside Thomasville. In early spring, the baby goats leap like salmon, momentarily bounding into view above the knee-deep emerald pastures that give the place its name. Norman cows keep a solemn watch.

In their third year of business, the Wehners supply Atlanta's best restaurants (Seeger's, Bacchanalia, the Ritz-Carlton, Four Seasons) with their goat's and cow's milk cheeses, and frequently ship supplies to chefs cooking at New York's James Beard House. At the American Cheese Society's 2002 contest, they won first prizes with their Thomasville Tome and Georgia Gouda.

College sweethearts from the time they met at the University of Georgia's dairy science program, the Wehners began as traditional agribusiness farmers, "triple-cropping" their land, and viewing soil as "an anchor," says Desiree. "Whatever you needed, you could add with

fertilizers or chemicals." The Milan trip, along with travels to Southern California and elsewhere, slowly changed their thinking, about farming and food. Now, their methodology is based on more natural, "rotational grazing" cycles, with fewer chemicals and grains, and an emphasis on quality over quantity. Desiree, who had always liked to cook and eat well, developed an appetite for "real food."

"I always liked what I did," she says of farming. "But I never loved what I did until I started making cheese." Despite her remote South Georgia location, the Internet helped quench her thirst for knowledge: Armed with some books she bought over the Internet, consulting cheese-making comrades from a Yahoo message board, and ordering exotic samples from fromage.com, she began to understand the rhythmic demands of the time-sensitive craft.

The dairy does not yet include a store, but a Web site, [www.sweet-grassdairy.com](http://www.sweet-grassdairy.com), describes some of the operations and cheeses. (Call 229-227-0752 to place an order.) Along with expanding the cheese-making operation, the Wehners have begun selling a limited amount of organic meat. Desiree also hopes to promote the cause of making safe, raw milk available for public consumption: "If we can eat raw oysters and sushi," she says, "we ought to be able to buy raw milk." She ought to know: Although lactose-intolerant, she's able to digest it far more easily.

KRISTA REESE

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