GRAVY

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Southern Foodways Alliance

L. Kasimu Harris

GRAVY

THE SFA SERVES YOU...

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FEATURES

Cover photo by
L. KASIMU HARRIS

First Helpings

JUST VISITIN'

JVC (right) with SFA member Caroline Rosen in New Orleans

Courtesy of Jennifer V. Cole

I CAN HARDLY REMEMBER A time the SFA wasn't a part of my life. You are my chosen family. So I was flattered, honored, and, quite frankly, terrified when Sara Camp Milam asked me to take the reins of this issue of *Gravy*. SFA is my home. You take care of your home.

Though I'm a proud daughter of the red clay hills of central Mississippi, in this issue, I've chosen to pay tribute to Alabama, where I went to college (Auburn), and where I've stashed my bourbon and welcomed friends to my humble porch for the past decade. Languid afternoons on the swing and late-night revelry have reinforced my appreciation for this place and its people. Some of us have therapists. I have the porch. The repertory act of gathering for good food and drink, breathing fresh air, and connecting with kith and kin restores and rejuvenates. The bourbon is really just a bonus.

This time of year, nothing sustains like submersion in Alabama's robust lake culture, a scene I know well from many (*many*) days dock sitting and star-flecked nights skinny dipping. In "Nothing Green but the Plates" (page 46), David Hagedorn reflects on the ritual and pageantry of the experience.

As this issue hits your hands, I will be moving from Birmingham for a new adventure in New Orleans, where I plan to post up often at Cafe Henri (on the cover). So, while this issue is my swan song to this state and its lakes, dynamic immigrant populations, and Chez Fonfon chicken liver mousse, Alabama will always resonate. Maybe, in another decade Sara Camp will ask me to edit the JVC Louisiana edition. They have porches there, too. —*Jennifer V. Cole*

FEATURED CONTRIBUTOR
NATALIE NELSON

When *Gravy* thinks about adding visual elements to a story, the choice between illustration and photograph is usually straightforward. Over the past year, when we aimed to evoke a playful approach, we've called on **NATALIE NELSON.** Her drawings are lighthearted; they can poke fun, and are often charmingly unexpected. In *Gravy*, her work has illustrated Sandra Beasley's poetry and David Wondrich's futuristic drink recipes. She's contributed to the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and has two picture books to her credit. This issue, you'll find her take on John Kessler's experience at Nashville's Treehouse on page 65.

What are you working on these days?
I'm illustrating a picture book about the collective nouns we use for groups of animals, which comes out in 2018 with Groundwood Books. I work on several editorial illustrations each month, which is always exciting because each new job offers the chance to read an interesting article and solve a new creative challenge. Additionally, I've been making bookstore and school visits to promote *The King of the Birds*, a picture book I illustrated that came out last fall. It was written by Acree Graham Macam and is inspired by Flannery O'Connor. The book weaves real events from O'Connor's childhood (like teaching her chicken to walk backwards) with an imagined tale about one of her beloved peacocks.

How did you develop your style of using mixed media and archival images?
It's hard to remember exactly how and when everything started to click. I had a wonderful high school art teacher who introduced me to mixed media artists like Robert Rauschenberg, and she challenged me to experiment and push boundaries with materials and processes. When I started pursuing illustration more seriously, I found that combining photo pieces with my drawings lent a sense of humor and levity to my work, and for the first time I really connected with the pieces I was making.

What's your forthcoming book about?
My new picture book, *Uncle Holland*, written by JonArno Lawson, is essentially a story about making choices. The main character, Holland, has a mischievous streak and a problem with stealing things. Eventually, he is faced with a choice between two consequences for his theft: go to jail or join the army. He chooses to join the army, and while he is stationed on a tropical island, he learns to paint the exotic fish that he sees in the ocean. He eventually realizes, through painting, that "not everything that's pretty can be stuffed in your pockets." The book comes out April 11.

Justen Clay

What are you watching or reading that helps expand your work? How do you get ideas?
I try to get off of the internet as much as possible when I'm coming up with concepts for new projects. I like to go on walks or bike rides to clear my head and think through the tasks ahead of me. I just finished reading *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead. And I started watching *The Crown* on Netflix because I got an assignment to illustrate an article about the show.

Chris Watkins

GET HELP

IN CODED DINING SPACES, CUSTOMERS PLAY A ROLE, TOO

by Osayi Endolyn

I SAW WRITER-DIRECTOR Jordan Peele's horror film *Get Out* (no spoilers here), about a young black man who meets his white girlfriend's family for the first time during a visit to her parents' estate. As the title suggests, the protagonist realizes something is not quite right, but he tries to rationalize the strange circumstances as nervous responses to his interracial relationship.

The film disturbed me, in part because those circumstances felt so familiar. Being a person of a color in environments that are predominantly white can be tricky. In one scene, a white neighbor remarks that he "knows Tiger," in an apparent attempt to connect with the black visitor who shows only polite, marginal interest in golf. The moment is hilarious, awkward, and offensive. I empathized with a character who struggles to identify why he's being treated a certain way. Was he tapping into something that's just not being talked about, or was he paranoid?

The traditional criteria for dining out are quality of food, level of service, and budget. I'm not sure when, but I recently added "vibe" to my list. I don't mean physical ambiance or mood music. I mean, how does it feel for me to *be* in that space? Over the years, I've found that this experience is sometimes outside of a restaurant's control. *Et tu,* fellow patron?

While ordering a pour of bourbon at an Atlanta airport bar last fall, an older white man seated nearby began to guide me toward "what's good" on the spirits list. Maybe he was just being neighborly, I thought later, sipping my Woodford Reserve neat (which I ordered unassisted, thank you). Strangers sitting at bars speak to one another, I reasoned. But his impromptu tutor session nagged at me. He didn't seem concerned with helping anyone else.

Once, seated at the bar at a tapas restaurant in Asheville, the bartender asked my boyfriend and me a question that frequent restaurant-goers despise: *Have you dined with us before?* I usually lie and say yes, because I'd rather skip the speech that goes, *Small plates are small, entrées are larger, and drinks are, gasp! located in a box that says DRINKS.* But this night we told the truth, which yielded the requisite intro. A white woman seated two seats down with her companion, overheard and took interest. I could feel her staring as I eyed the menu. She leaned over and said, "We come here all the time. If you need any pointers, any suggestions, we can help." I glanced up with a reserved smile and returned to my menu. She continued, "The menu here can be so overwhelming, it's so-oo much to take in." She wasn't going to let up. I was annoyed by her unsolicited comments. How did she determine we were lost in the weeds? Sorry, but we knew el pan from las papas.

WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME A RANDOM DINER ASSUMED THEY NATURALLY KNEW MORE THAN YOU?

"Thank you," I said. "But we've both spent time in Barcelona, so I think we'll be OK." That was the end of that.

A couple weeks later, my friend chastised me for getting fresh. "She was just being nice," he countered. I asked him: When was the last time he consistently received ordering advice from fellow customers? At bars? At wine shops? When was the last time a random diner assumed they naturally knew more than you about what you wanted to eat or drink and told you as much? "Never," he said. His eyebrows rose with new insight. "That has never happend to me."

Back at the theater, after the credits rolled, the lights turned on. Several black people were still glued to their seats. We migrated toward each other in the aisle and talked about the movie until the custodian kindly kicked us out. We were in agreement: while Peele toys with the social conditions of race and gender to make his (horror-inducing) point, the brilliance of the film is that he doesn't have to try that hard to make typical experiences feel a notch past creepy. "You walk into a room," one woman described being the only black person in a white space, "and it's like all their eyes are on you."

Osayi Endolyn is the SFA's associate editor.

RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

FOOD JOURNALISM IN A MULTICULTURAL AMERICA

by Michael Twitty

This piece was commissioned at the 2016 Rivendell Congregation, an SFA- and Soul Summit-hosted event at Rivendell Writers' Colony in Sewanee, Tennessee, which addressed racism and difference in food writing. This call-to-change, written for the food media, also serves as a thoughtful challenge for consumers.

THE FOOD MEDIA WORLD searches its soul. It grapples with how to navigate identity and class politics; race, gender, and sexuality constructs; and intersectional complications.

Some see these challenges as superfluous to food writing. Others are hungry to address them. With issues of sociopolitical tone, nomenclature, and cultural power guiding national conversations, this is a good time to work toward greater diversity and inclusion.

Editors, producers, and writers must dismantle practices that further divide white and nonwhite. Appropriation, the dirty word of the day, is only part of the problem. While the term is often dismissed as a symptom of perceived victimhood, leading to flashpoints and inadequate framing, appropriation is a problem to be countered. In this multicultural food-scape, how we write matters. How we read counts, too.

Recruit writers of color and writers who represent underserved communities, especially when publishing stories about those communities. Cast a light on classic food traditions relayed by writers who are often pigeonholed into limited spaces based on ethnicity or class.

Introduce readers to expert voices within a culture. First locate master cooks and scholars who have been recognized as authorities in their own communities, especially when doing on-the-ground research. Community scholars aren't all degreed, but they represent a wealth of knowledge. Identify published sources within the community. Don't assume that only outside experts and translators can lead.

Foster cross-cultural dialogue by inviting writers of different backgrounds to work together on the same story. Lora Smith and Tunde Wey, part of my cohort at Rivendell, co-authored a piece for *NPR* about dining in Appalachia that blended their distinct yet overlapping points of view. Pieces like theirs create learning opportunities that honor all voices inside and outside a cultural aggregate.

Let's cease asking, "Where are all the [fill-in-the-blank] chefs?" They are here, and many would appreciate being interviewed and amplified. Culinarians of various backgrounds work in myriad spaces, from private homes, to catering businesses, to pop-ups, not just in executive roles.

Immigrant cooks and their children have more to share than their "boat narratives." Immigrant stories are about more than struggle. Until you know how a chef self-identifies or locates their identity, assume nothing, except that they embody a place in American culture and its inherent diversity. The same goes for people who grew up in underprivileged or socially oppressed environments. Interview them as people, not as archetypes.

Embrace stories about foods or practices that aren't filtered through a mainstream point of view. Interpreting other cultures through popular American values (read: white, hetero, male) often misses the originating community's point. Find out how people in that community think about the food or practice and incorporate their take into the story.

CELEBRATE DON'T "DISCOVER"

Aren't we tired of Columbusing yet? Let's build excitement around communities that celebrate their own traditions, ingredients, techniques, and styles, rather than "swagger jacking" centuries-old practices. It's OK to highlight chefs from outside a community, but it's misleading to only offer outsiders a platform to represent that cuisine or culture. Writers should not compare chefs in communities of color with white chefs doing the same culinary repertoire unless they are willing to report on both.

GO BIG

As *Gravy* readers know, food writing is more than what's served for dinner. Writers must continue to tackle issues that impact the larger picture of food in a given locale. Food and wealth disparities, food access, gentrification, and police overreach can and often do impact a community's food culture.

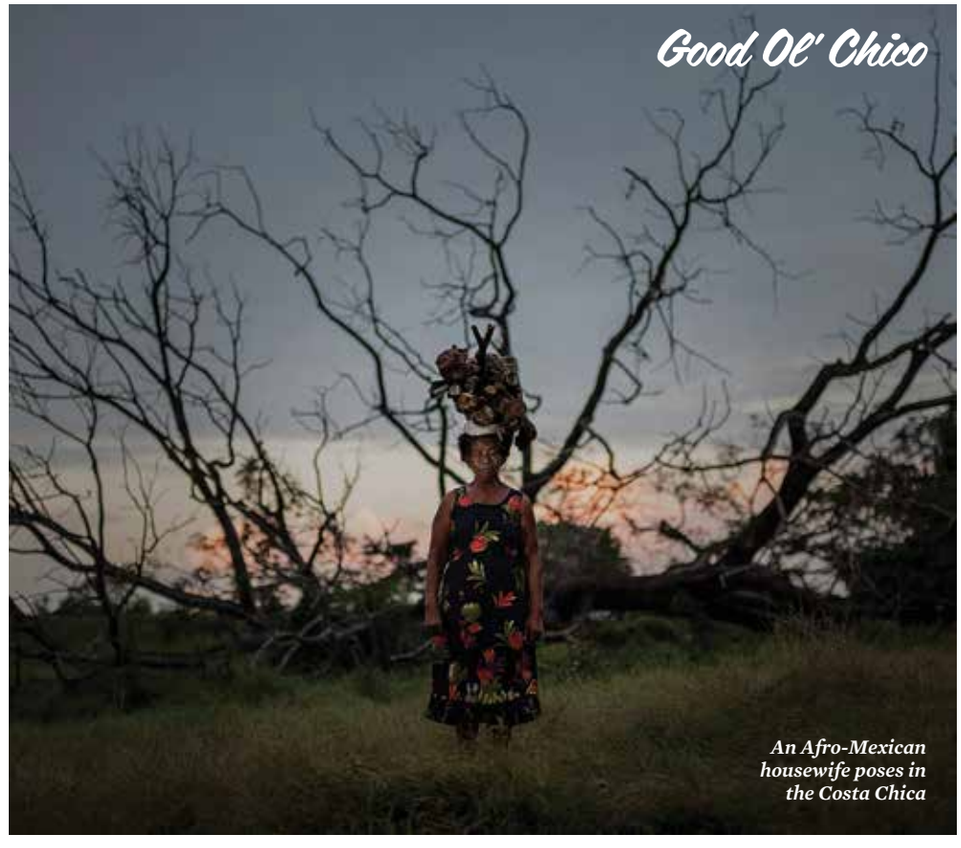
DITCH THE DRAMA

Conflict sells and generates clicks. But stories that amplify culinary justice and partnerships can benefit many. Multiple examples of cooperation, understanding, and community empowerment risk being buried. Consider Sapelo Island, Georgia, where the search for Southern heirloom ingredients, such as ribbon cane syrup, is empowering both scholars and the Gullah-Geechee community.

WATCH OUT FOR "AUTHENTICITY"

Lukewarm attempts at authenticity do not bode well for any of us, especially when outsiders write about other cultures. For example, it can be insulting when audiences are instructed on how to "authentically" prepare and enjoy traditional foods that have been around for centuries (and often readily available in the United States for generations)—when the teacher is a self-proclaimed expert not from that community.

Michael Twitty, a 2014 Smith Symposium Fellow, and 2016 TED Fellow, writes at the award-winning blog, Afroculinaria. *His book* The Cooking Gene*, will be published in August by HarperCollins.*



An Afro-Mexican housewife poses in the Costa Chica

Mara Sánchez-Renero

MORE THAN MERE MEXICANS

THREE MEXICAN DIASPORAS IN THE AMERICAN SOUTH

by Gustavo Arellano

Growing up, I didn't consider myself Mexican, or American, or even Mexican-American. My cultures were *cargaderense*, *jerezano*, and *zacatecano*, hyper-regional identities referring to my parent's home village (El Cargadero) and municipality (Jerez) in the Mexican state of Zacatecas. Over a century of migration from those areas to my hometown of Anaheim, California, resulted in a community of thousands where our definition of "Mexican" differed from what Americans knew. We didn't like mariachi; we preferred *tamborazo*, Mexican brass bands. We didn't wear sombreros; we liked *tejanas*, our name for Stetsons (it translates

as "Texans"—go figure). Soccer was a mystery to us; we played baseball.

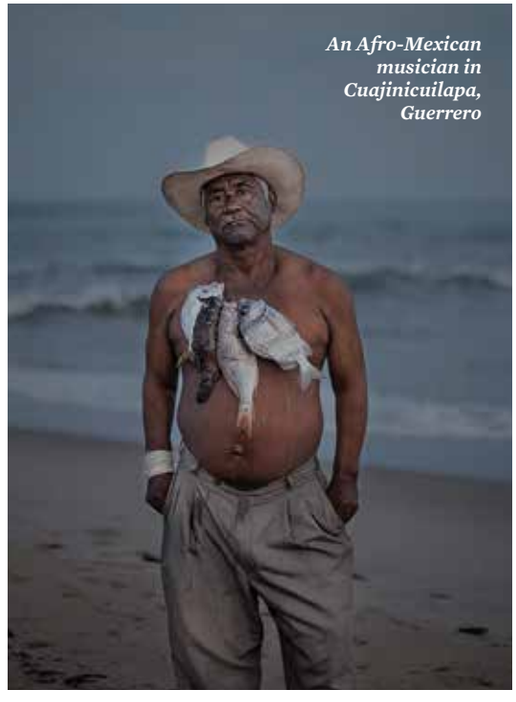
My upbringing is nothing new. Transplant micro-communities in the United States date to when Italians adopted New York City neighborhoods according to their home provinces, and Irish-Americans sung ballads about the good days in County Cork or Kerry. Micro-communities remain the best way to understand Mexican migration in the South. Most of those immigrants don't consider themselves *mexicanos*. They're more aligned by city, state, language, or even race. Following are quick dispatches about three distinct Mexican diasporas in *el Sur*. May they inspire *ustedes* to engage with your Mexican neighbors, beyond just a morning *hola*.

AFRO-MEXICANS IN WINSTON-SALEM

WINSTON-SALEM, NORTH Carolina, is home to one of the most famous Mexican communities in the South. Here, tens of thousands of residents trace their roots to the Costa Chica, a coastal area that spans the states of Guerrero and Oaxaca. *Costachiqueños* have garnered academic and media attention in the United States and Mexico because they're three times a minority: shunned by Mexicans for being black, by African-Americans for being Mexican, and by whites for being something they have a hard time understanding. They are Afro-Mexican. Bobby Vaughn, anthropology professor at Notre Dame de Namur University in California, has written articles about the Costa Chica-Winston Salem connection. During the 1990s as an undergraduate student, he went to Cuajinicuilapa, Guerrero, home to one of the largest Afro-Mexican communities in Mexico. "I saw black people, and I was dumbfounded," Vaughn told the *Winston-Salem Journal* in 2005. "I saw old men who looked like my grandfather."

These Afro-Mexicans are descended from slaves who escaped the Spanish crown in the 16th century. Their isolation led to the cultivation of traditions—dances, foods, music—that define one of the lesser-known stories from the African diaspora. Costa Chica migration to North Carolina is, arguably, credited to one man: Viterbo Calleja-Garcia. In 1978, while working at a ranch in Texas, a smuggler told him there was better money in the tobacco fields of the Tar Heel State. He went, found the living good, then sent word to relatives in Cuajinicuilapa and in Santa Ana, California, where an Afro-Mexican community had already established itself. Over the next four decades, enough people from "Cuaji" arrived that today, Vaughn estimates 80 percent of Winston-Salem's Latino community—about 27,000 in real numbers—can claim Guerrero as their home state.

Winston-Salem is enough of a destination for Costa Chica cultural life that it frequently hosts musicians and personalities from Mexico. Parties feature the region's musical genre called *chilenas*—think sped-up Stax horns mixed with a galloping percussion section. The city has also hosted Guerrero's most popular comedian, Tico Mendoza, who goes by the nickname "El Arrecho De La Costa" (politely, "The Flirt from the Coast").



An Afro-Mexican musician in Cuajinicuilapa, Guerrero

Mara Sánchez-Renero

HOT WATER IN THE BLUEGRASS

LAURA PATRICIA RAMÍREZ owns Tortillería y Taquería Ramírez in Lexington, Kentucky, which rolls the best burrito in the South. If you don't believe me, you haven't tried it. She's a Mexican pioneer in the Bluegrass State, having arrived in 1985. Ramírez still remembers when there was just one Spanish-language Catholic Mass in the entire state (in Springfield), a time when you could literally fit all of Kentucky's Mexican immigrants in one large room.

Ramírez's home state is Jalisco. That state's love of horses and spirits made it a natural origin point for many of Kentucky's first Mexican migrants. When I interviewed her for an SFA oral history project in 2015, a different group of Mexicans dominated life in the Bluegrass. "I never thought that there would be so many Mexicans," Ramírez said, "and it's all people from Aguascalientes."

The small central state is famous in Mexico for its natural springs (hence its name, which translates to "hot waters") and blankets (called *cobijas San Marcos*, renowned for their thickness and colorful designs). On Alexandria Drive, in the heart of Lexington's barrio (called "Mexington"), multiple businesses use the name "Aguascalientes": supermarkets, bakeries, taquerías, a sports bar, and more. This concentrated naming convention is always a telltale sign that a particular diaspora has set up camp in an American city.

Despite this new wave, little research has been done on *hidrocálidos* (the demonym for people from Aguascalientes) in Kentucky. The 2005 book *New Destinations: Mexican Immigration*

in the United States, which features a chapter on migration to Mexington, didn't mention the Aguascalientes connection. To some grad student out there, here's your dissertation. *De nada.*

MEXICAN INDIANS IN SCIENTOLOGY TOWN

PERCENTAGE-WISE, HILDAGO has sent more of its US-bound natives to the South than any other Mexican state—over a third. Raleigh, Atlanta, and Orlando were the top three destinations for *hidalguenses* entering the United States in 2010, according to the Instituto de los Mexicanos en el Exterior (Institute of Mexicans Abroad). Many come from La Huasteca, the region I described during a Southern Foodways symposium in 2012 as the South's brothers from another *madre*. People from here also love low-and-slow barbecue and the music called *son huasteco*, where high yodels meet awesome fiddle breaks, resulting in a kind of mestizo Bill Monroe.

Hidalguense migration reflects much modern-day Mexican migration to the States: people come from Southern Mexico, and are frequently indigenous. Take Clearwater, Florida, known internationally as the spiritual headquarters of Scientology. Here is a community from the municipality of Ixmiquilpan, made up of mostly Otomí Indians (or, as they call themselves, Hñähñu). Last year, a group of Hidalgo teachers taught the Hñähñu language and shared customs with hundreds of children in Clearwater.

This is a unique Mexican community in many ways. Instead of living in the shadows, Hñähñu leaders have openly courted relationships with city government. They've organized soccer leagues through the Clearwater parks and recreation department, and city police have traveled to Hidalgo to meet with indigenous leaders. The cross-cultural meeting happened after immigration raids in the 1990s severely impacted the area's important tourism industry.

Clearwater's Mexicans prove that, contrary to popular opinion, we often assimilate into America—not gradually, but completely. Consider the story of US Army specialist Arturo Huerta-Cruz, a Countryside High School graduate. He was born in Ixmiquilpan before his family migrated to the United States when Huerta-Cruz was seven. The 23-year-old was a so-called "green card soldier," a term describing the 65,000-plus men and women who serve in hopes of becoming American citizens. An IED in Iraq killed Huerta-Cruz in 2008. On the day of his funeral, flags in Clearwater and Tallahassee flew at half-mast. "Arturo was a green card soldier," a councilmember told the *St. Petersburg Times* after his funeral, "but he was a son of Clearwater."

Gustavo Arellano is the editor of OC Weekly *and a* Gravy *columnist.*

Courtesy of Jim Peppler

Georgia Gilmore, cook and midwife from Montgomery, Alabama

BOTTOM OF THE POT

JOHN T. EDGE SHARES ORIGIN STORIES FROM *THE POTLIKKER PAPERS*

THIS MAY, SFA DIRECTOR John T. Edge and Penguin Press publish *The Potlikker Papers: A Food History of the Modern South*. John T. has now edited or written more than a dozen books. This one is more personal. This one includes a foreword as homage to John Egerton, inspired by the words John T. spoke at Egerton's memorial celebration. This book is an attempt to track the revolutions, minor and major, that have transformed the South over the last sixty years.

We know we're biased, but we think this project is a soaring, powerful contribution to the conversation about our ever-changing region, told through the narratives of the farmers and cooks and waiters who did the work. *The Potlikker Papers* begins in the 1950s, during the early stages of the civil rights movement, and closes in the 2010s, as El Sur

Latino comes into focus. Along the way, John T. shows how working class foods became the new baseline for today's inspired American cuisine.

Focusing on early moments in the first half of *Potlikker Papers*, we asked John T. to share how he selected these characters. Read on for his take, prefaced by excerpts from the book.

1950s
KITCHEN TABLES

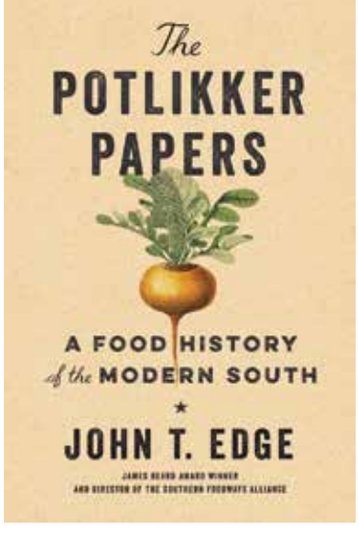
GEORGIA GILMORE
MONTGOMERY, ALABAMA
cook and midwife

EXCERPT *Georgia Gilmore inspired black citizens of Montgomery. And she worried whites, who clung to the idea that, through daily intimate exchange, black cooks and maids became members of their family. Domestics worked for love, whites came to understand, but that love was for their own black families.*

I was traveling in Alabama, looking for stories, trying to develop a proposal for what became, fifteen years later, *The Potlikker Papers*. At the time, I wanted to write a book about the impact of race and racism on Southern food culture. On a visit to the Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery, Penny Weaver suggested that if I wanted to write about the civil rights movement and food, Georgia Gilmore was the person to talk about.

This was electrifying. Here was a woman, a cook, who lived the ideals of the movement. She took an explicit and active role. She wasn't ancillary. She didn't "support" the movement. She *drove* the movement. Beginning in December of 1955, she baked and sold cakes and pies, chicken sandwiches, and pork chop plates, raising money that funded the alternate transportation system, so that the black citizens of Montgomery could travel back and forth to work while boycotting the city bus system.

During the 1960s, after she began a house restaurant, Gilmore convened the architects of the civil rights movement in her kitchen. In all of my time researching and writing about Southern food, her story may be the most compelling. To honor



Gilmore, I wrote about her for the *Oxford American* in 2000, shared her story with the Kitchen Sisters who produced an *NPR* documentary, and returned to her story for *The Potlikker Papers*.

Digging back into my old reporter notebooks, while writing this book, I discovered that I had compiled a wealth of material that never made it into that magazine article. I had taken detailed notes on the interior of Gilmore's house when I toured it with her sister. I had a transcript from my interview with her son. I also tapped transcripts of interviews done by the Kitchen Sisters when they traveled to Montgomery. I leveraged, too, interviews with maids and cooks undertaken by Fisk University during that moment. Utilizing sources old and new, I was able to bring her story into greater relief. During the research and writing, I fell in love all over again with Georgia Gilmore, with her character, her grit, her sass, and her joyful revolutionary manner.

1960s
POOR POWER

FANNIE LOU HAMER
SUNFLOWER COUNTY, MISSISSIPPI
civil rights activist

EXCERPT *At a time when many left the Delta for manufacturing and service jobs in cities, when few could feed themselves from what they grew, Hamer struggled to persuade blacks to stay and farm. For black Southerners, those linkages to the land were tangled. By the late 1960s, freedom meant release from the demands of agriculture. It meant measuring work by the punch of the time clock, not the weight of a bale.*

This chapter makes explicit Martin Luther King Jr.'s late career pronouncement that, after the civil rights movement focused American attention on equal access to public spaces (which yielded the Civil Rights Act of 1964), and unencumbered access to ballot boxes (enforced by the Voting Rights Act of 1965), a more arduous struggle followed. To achieve true freedom, black citizens focused next on jobs and wealth creation and food access. The story of Fannie Lou Hamer, a daughter of the Mississippi Delta, brings that struggle to life.

Readers might know her as the founder of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. She stood up to confront the white-controlled Democratic party of Mississippi, declaring them illegitimate. Like King, she pivoted later in life to focus on food access.

Across the the nation, activists in their twenties are now agitating for food sovereignty, working to democratize food access. In the story of Fannie Lou Hamer's Freedom Farm, and Pig Bank, we recognize that those

contemporary narratives have deep roots in the Mississippi Delta. Over the last three years, I've probably gotten six calls from well-meaning graduate students and foundation fellows who want to do transformative work in the Mississippi Delta. They aim to do urban farming work and help often-marginalized citizens grow their own food. When I ask if they have heard of Fannie Lou Hamer's pioneering food sovereignty work, few have. Few recognize that the model for their own modern-day activism can be found in the life and work of Hamer.

1970s
LANDED HIPPIES

STEPHEN GASKIN
THE FARM
SUMMERTOWN, TENNESSEE
agricultural activist

EXCERPT *For a band of hippies, determined to apprehend their roots and return to the land, the South appeared a place both raw and pure, a fountainhead of primal American culture. Hippies in search of honest American expression studied the South. Knowledge of the region served as a countercurrency.*

Writing this book, I fell in love with the 1970s. Americans have a tendency to dismiss the seventies as a vacuous decade, defined by pet rocks and drivel disco. I was inspired by the idealism of Stephen Gaskin, a Marine veteran and psychedelically inclined religious teacher, who quit the Haight-Ashbury of 1960s San Francisco to found a Tennessee agricultural commune called The Farm. At that time, many Southerners had quit the agricultural life. Farm life, for both working class whites and blacks, had been recently and narrowly defined by sharecropping. Both wanted to escape. Gaskin and his followers led a return to the land, a kind of Southern counterrevolution to reclaim an agricultural life.

These young, hippie idealists idealized Mother Earth. They saw promise in the rural precincts. They took their cues from an earlier generation of Southerners. Many know the story of Foxfire educational initiative, which gained traction in Georgia in the 1970s, where high school students took to the woods to interview their elders. The hippies of the Haight were similarly motivated. In an effort to restart the farming economy, they applied the same curiosity that the Foxfire kids leveraged. They said, "We see value in the traditional means and methods; tell us how you do it, we want to learn from you."

That respect across generations is not always showcased. Yes, marijuana usage was part of the ethic at The Farm. Sure, members of The Farm engaged, at first, in four-person and six-person marriages. Yet, in many ways these hippies were as respectful of the Southern farming lifestyle as were the elders from whom they learned. These long hairs were new and complicated and purposeful Southerners. At a time when many were giving up on the South, when many were quitting the rural life, they chose the South. They claimed the South. Throughout the book, I aimed to highlight Southerners like the good folk who worked The Farm, people who confound and complicate stereotypes.

1970s
FASTER FOOD

COLONEL SANDERS
CORBIN, KENTUCKY
commodifier of traditional foods

EXCERPT *Southerners recognized new value in unheralded traditions and practices. So did the rest of the nation... Southern foods, from fried chicken to biscuits, became American foods, whether they were prepared by an apron-clad grandmother with a cirrus of gray hair or a corporate employee dressed in a polyester uniform with her name stitched across the breast.*

I grew up eating country-fried steak biscuits and sausage biscuits from Hardee's. As I dug into the story of Hardee's, Kentucky Fried Chicken, and Popeye's—American fast food companies with origins in the South—I recognized that we too often frame fast food as a horror that's been visited upon the region, delivered to our doorsteps by outsiders. But if you look closely at the origins of those national chains, you recognize that, with burgers as the most glaring exception, American fast food has been built on Southern ingredients, repackaged and commodified for contemporary drive-through culture.

Colonel Sanders, the founder and eventual mascot of the KFC brand, was a self-aware architect of modernity. And a peddler of Southern nostalgia, who helped redefine how Americans ate. He codified fried chicken as a Southern dish for twentieth century America. To sell that chicken to potential franchisees, he dressed in a white suit and a string tie, and played the part of a moonlight-and-magnolias colonel, fresh from the veranda. That conceit sold buckets.

Fast food is a reflection of the region. The arrival of mass-produced fried chicken and biscuits signifies the end of the country store South, and the beginning of the strip mall South. After Sanders sold his company to investors, as his brand gained national traction, he grew increasingly irritable. In the 1970s, Sanders became nearly as famous for cussing as he was for frying. The crust on the birds his successors sold by the bucket, he said, tasted like a "damn fried doughball put on top of some chicken." It was as if Sanders recognized his complicity in the reinvention of traditional Southern foodways.

ABOVE: (from left) Duane Nutter, Tiffanie Barriere, and Reggie Washington

Matthew Coughlin; top right, Jeff Moore

MOBILE'S MODERN SOUL

THE ATLANTA DREAM TEAM OF DUANE NUTTER, REGGIE WASHINGTON, AND TIFFANIE BARRIERE ARE BRINGING THEIR SOUTHERN-GLOBAL STYLE TO ALABAMA'S PORT CITY

by Julia Bainbridge

WOULD YOU CALL meatloaf, sandwiched with sautéed spinach and a fried egg, "soul food"? Or would you call okra, served as a side to soy-glazed grouper, "soul food"?

Through those dishes, chef Duane Nutter started communicating to diners at One Flew South in Atlanta, Georgia's Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport in 2008. He calls his style "Southernational"—food rooted in Southern cooking and inspired by the chef's travels around the world. He doesn't call it soul food.

"It's from *my* soul," Nutter told me, "but it's not the TV soul that you think is soul food. It has a lot to do with me being raised in Seattle and being from Louisiana: My collard greens may have star anise in them."

"There is always an expectation that if you're a black guy, you'll do things a certain way," he continued. "I do things my way."

This spring, Nutter, restaurateur Reggie Washington, and beverage director Tiffanie Barriere will open Southern National in Mobile, Alabama. In the process they will go from one of the world's busiest airports to a port city that helped build the South.

Like many cities across the country, Mobile is having something of a renaissance. Employment trends in the city are promising: Shipbuilder Austal USA, the city's largest private employer, has been hiring robustly from 2009 to 2015, the same year that Airbus brought its $600 million facility to the United States. This trio is making sure the rebirth includes better dining.

Perhaps most importantly, Nutter and Washington will own Southern National. It falls under Port City Hospitality, the name that Nutter and Washington gave to their LLC.

Across the South, equity is an issue for black chefs. As former *Atlanta* magazine restaurant critic Corby Kummer wrote in his farewell review, there are "not enough black chefs and owners, something I'd hoped would go with the diverse restaurant crowds and staff." African American representation is weak across the country's kitchens. Kummer wondered what could be done to bring more diversity into the back of the house.

Southern National is an example of one solution, hatched 300-odd miles south. "I was like, 'Hey, I'm not gonna keep takin' out your trash,'" Nutter said about ending his relationship with One Flew South. "'I'm gonna grow up and own something.'" The turning point came during a 2:30 a.m. phone call from Delta's operations manager. A fire alarm had gone off, and it was Nutter's name that was listed as One Flew South's emergency contact. "I don't know why they didn't just call the maintenance guy," he said. Nutter drove to the airport, met with mechanics and technicians, and solved the problem. Now, if he has to answer 2:30 a.m. phone calls, Nutter wants to do it as an equity partner.

'YOU DON'T WANT TO SHOW UP IN A NEW TOWN, FLEXIN' WITH A BUNCH OF TWEEZERS. YOU GOTTA COOK FOOD THAT PEOPLE WANT TO EAT.'

American media consumers expect stories about people of color in this industry to be stories of underdogs. This one isn't. As a boy, Nutter wanted to cook, so he found a way, developing a relationship with Darryl Evans, the kingpin Atlanta chef of the early 1980s. Evans, who was black, led the modern Southern restaurant Azalea, forging a cuisine that was grounded in the

A rendering of the soon-to-open Southern National in Mobile, Alabama

South but not limited by the South.

Nutter's family didn't get why he'd want to do "domestic work," which they, black descendants of slaves, felt was a step back.

Our acknowledgment that minorities face challenges isn't unfounded, though. Port City Hospitality is just one of a few shining examples of success."We are a part of the small groups of African American guys in the industry who have been able to create a brand and open on the level that we're doing it," said Washington, who was born and raised in Mobile.

His cousin, Oliver Washington IV, a fourth-generation horticulturist, still manages the family's 50-acre plant nursery as well as their pecan, muscadine, kumquat, and satsuma orchards. The two men recently launched the five-acre Down the Road Farm. Ten miles from Southern National, it will supply the restaurant with fruits, vegetables, and herbs.

Nutter wants the food at Southern National to reflect his style and ambition, but he also wants it to be approachable. His pimento cheese plate will come with pickled cauliflower and sesame crackers, and he will top his chicken schnitzel with crawfish sauce. "You don't want to show up in a new town, flexin' with a bunch of tweezers," he said. "You gotta cook food that people want to eat. You know, there's a whole fleet of people over there making $85,000 a year, but they drive F-150s and wear blue jeans every day."

Nutter wants Southern National to be "fun, a little bit loud—somewhere you come after work to grab a drink, and then, on the weekends, you can get dressed up and get something to eat," he said. "I want it to be like a country club that everybody can come to."

Julia Bainbridge is the food editor of Atlanta *magazine and a James Beard Award-nominated writer. She's also the host and creator of* The Lonely Hour*, a podcast about loneliness that's not a bummer.*

Courtesy of Port City Hospitality, LLC

THE VALUE OF SOUTHERN FOOD

AN ACADEMIC TALLIES UP WHAT PRESTIGE AND PROGRESS ARE ACTUALLY WORTH

by Kat Kinsman

DR. KRISHNENDU RAY HAS CRUNCHED THE NUMBERS AND EATEN the food. Researching his most recent monograph *The Ethnic Restaurateur*, the New York University associate professor and author delved into data from Michelin and Zagat to assess the influence and reputation of world cuisines. He compared those cuisines by the price and prestige they command in restaurants. Southern food "took a beating," in his words, on prestige. But Ray isn't counting it out. He's convinced that one future of American food is in small Southern cities.

What does your research tell you about the perception of the value of Southern food?

I have data from 1986 to 2016 from the bigger markets on the coasts, and Chicago. I'll start on a cautionary note on what I saw in terms of the data about New York City, and America's top restaurants. I asked: "What cuisines are popular? What are the cuisines that have prestige?" I count prestige by considering the average price of a meal for one person with two glasses of wine. Higher price means higher prestige. I noticed the precipitous decline in the category of "Southern" in terms of price.

What was behind this decline?

A couple of things are going on. One is that there is confusion and anxiety about what is Southern—

Krishnendu Ray

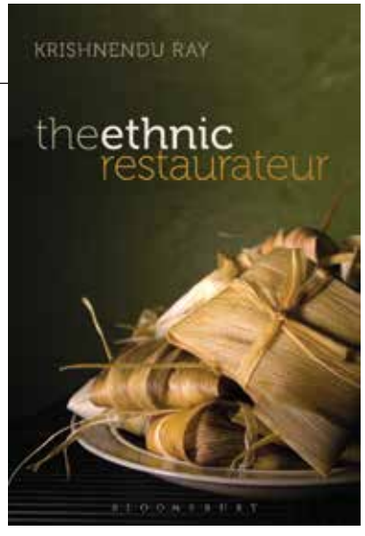
Photos courtesy of Krishnendu Ray

which I think also is its promise. It has gotten embroiled in this question of race. For me, that is the site of its importance in the future. It was one of the first self-conscious regional cuisines that had an haute cuisine aspect—especially cuisines of the cities and plantations—and also is poor people's food. As poor people's food, there's been all this quarrel and contention around "Is it white? Is it black? What are the roles of Native Americans and African-Americans and white Americans in constituting this cuisine? Who has been included and who has been excluded?" For me, that burden of Southern food is precisely the promise of its future.

What are some of the questions that will lead us to that future?

It is going to turn around, if not over the next few years, within the next decade when we will be able to reconcile some of these things: Is it haute cuisine, regional cuisine? Is it poor people's food? How do we think about poor people's food and haute cuisine when we think about regional cuisine?

It is wrestling with race, class, and region, and also always about gender; everyday cooking and spectacular cooking—restaurant cooking, cooking for television, celebrity chefs—compared to everyday cooking. If there is any place we can find some answers that would be worth thinking about, I think Southern cuisine is ahead of almost any other American regional cuisine.



Who is driving this exploration?

I see a new Asian migration including second- and third-generation chefs as well as people like Edward Lee, and numerous others like Sean Brock and Michael Twitty intervening. Vivian Howard, and African folks like Tunde Wey who's cooking in New Orleans—this is a fantastic cauldron out of which will come our future concept and practice of American cuisine. Marcie Cohen Ferris talks about the creativity and crisis of Southern cooking. I think they're related. Creativity is related to the crisis and contention in identity. And it's a good thing. It's a productive thing. We're going to see the reconciliation in the future.

Where is this happening?

Edward Lee is working on a book about new migrations, not in the big cities of the South, not in the big, bicoastal cities, but the little towns. Like when I went to Oxford, Mississippi, Vish Bhatt at Snackbar is cooking dishes like garam masala home fries, okra chaat, and daal hush puppies—very smart reconciliations between two things: roots (long histories) and routes of availability.

On one hand, we have longevity and durability. On the other, we see change because of new people flowing in, new ways, techniques, and ingredients. I see that in Edward Lee's work and Vish's work—things like collard greens in coconut milk. You take something that is durable and continuous and make it run along to new practices and imaginations. In this case, my lesson from the New York City material is the fastest rising cuisines we have seen—Japanese, and fine Italian, Korean, Greek—if they get entangled with Southern imagination, Southern practices, Southern traditions, we are going to have a lot of fun in the South.

How do you get people with a fixed notion of what Southern food is to try new things?

Food has always been one of the best ways to get to know someone else's culture. The barrier has been excessively polarized conceptions of class and race. In the New South—precisely because of its contentious past around race and class—we might be seeing some innovative ways of talking about it, of introducing difference without alienating people. What I'm finding there is the new, interesting food that is borrowing from working class foods and also borrowing from upper class foods and combining at the mid-market level.

Where do economic factors play into this?

In New York City it is very difficult to innovate simply because of prohibitive real estate rents. You have to figure out what you want to cook, as well as what the people who are going to pay to eat your food can tolerate and accept. Philadelphia is a much more interesting city where you can try out new things. If people don't show up within a few weeks, you won't go bankrupt. In New York City, you go bankrupt. I think Southern cities and smaller towns, especially university towns, are becoming that kind of innovative locus of experimentation and reinvention of tradition. Southern towns have become quieter and more durable spaces to think, innovate, try out, without getting embroiled in a high-risk cultural or economic venture.

I started with a pessimistic view and worry of why Southern became so invisible in the most creative conversations in New York City. But the more I read and travel the South, the more I engage with people working in Southern cuisine, I see that very crisis as a source of regeneration.

Kat Kinsman is the senior food and drinks editor at Extra Crispy *and author of* Hi, Anxiety. *She writes and speaks frequently on the topics of mental health and breakfast.*

"MILK"

FAMILY RECIPES

A PHOTO ESSAY BY CELESTIA MORGAN

Birmingham native, photographer, and teacher Celestia "Cookie" Morgan recalls being in the kitchen with her mother as a child. But she has no real memory of what they made. What she remembers is how it felt as her hands played in the raw ingredients and touched the dough. She knows they were cooking the food of her grandmother, the woman for whom she was named. She knows that, by preparing it, she and her mother were fostering a bridge to their family's past.

The images on the following pages are part of her "Family Recipes" series, a collection of photographs which explores the nostalgia and physical pull of recipes as a generational connector and reinforces the determined effort required to make them last.

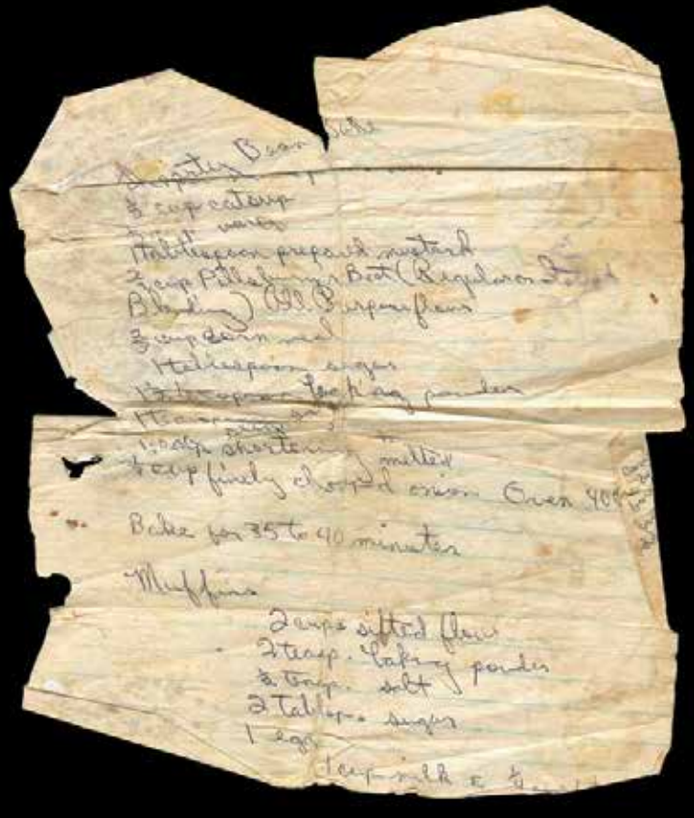
"The project is a connection to my grandmother," she says. "The process of creating the images almost felt spiritual to me. I never met her; I was born a year after she died. But people always talk about how she kept the family together by feeding them. I wanted to know who this woman was. I wanted to have a reenactment of how my mother learned how to make her biscuits. Aside from my name, I've never had a connection with my grandmother. But this project gave me one. I felt she was with me through this process—like I finally got to know her."

For Celestia, the ingredients slipping through the fingers in the photographs—the hands in the images are sometimes hers and sometimes her mother's—represent "the tradition [that] has slipped as generations have gone by. And the fluidty of time." The recipe cards are written in her grandmother's and her 86-year-old aunt's own scrawl. They are artifacts of the family's past.

As her own children (ages nine and two) have grown, Celestia has "felt the time of sitting at the table dissolving." She is a full-time student and teaches photography classes, which often means she arrives home late. [Her] work on "Family Recipes" has awakened an urge to share the power of food as a way to bind family. "When I do cook, I try to incorporate my children," she says. "And we now make it a point to eat dinner together as much as possible."

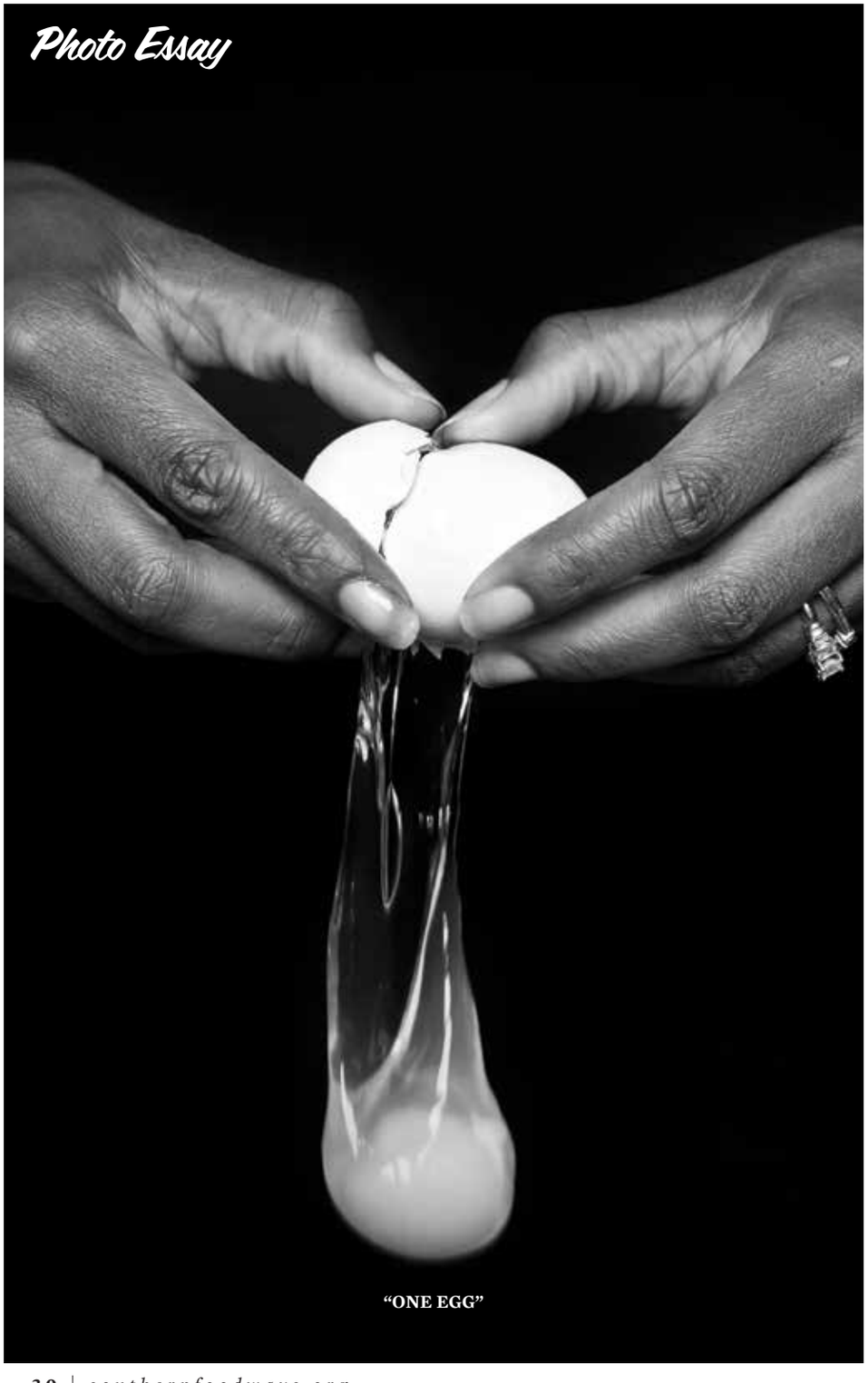
"I'm always telling my son that breakfast is the most important meal of the day, but recently he corrected me. 'No, it's not, Mommy. It's dinnertime because that's when we're all together.' That got me right there. That's what the project is about."

"FLOUR"

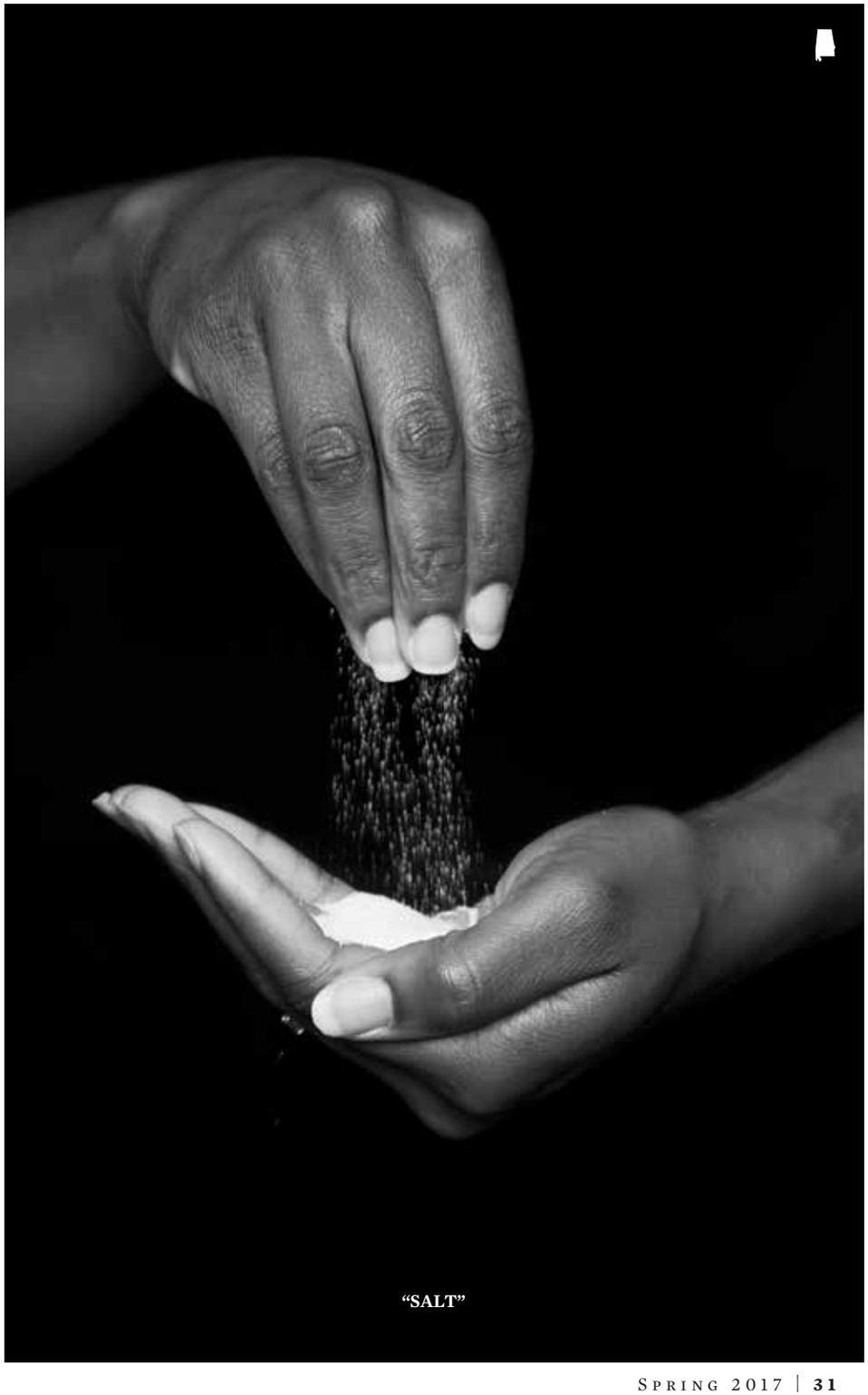


"HARDY BEAN BAKE"

"POUND CAKE"



"ONE EGG"

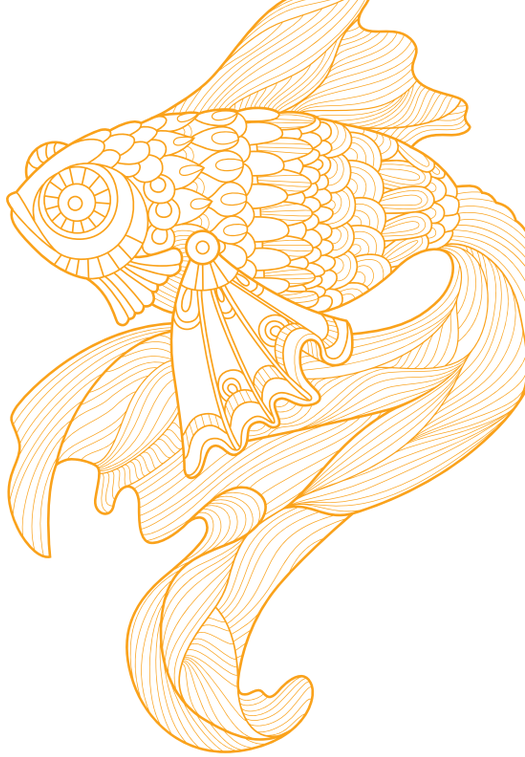


"SALT"

NOWRUZ: REBIRTH, RENEWAL, AND REPAST

Celebrating the Iranian New Year in Alabama BY PHILIP MALKUS

Andrew Thomas Lee



A PALPABLE CHEERFULNESS RIPPLES THROUGH THE AIR WHENEVER PARDIS STITT GLIDES THROUGH ONE OF HER RESTAURANTS' DINING ROOMS.

Her reassuring presence epitomizes hospitality. She floats among tables, tucking a strand of curly black hair behind one ear to lean in and murmur hellos to guests in her soothing alto. Stitt doesn't simply attract regulars. She nurtures them. She remembers whether you like white Burgundy or small-batch bourbon; if she runs into you at the grocery store, she casually mentions that the Brussels sprouts salad you always ordered has reappeared on the menu.

Pardis and her husband Frank Stitt run three restaurants in Birmingham, Alabama: Highlands Bar and Grill, which melds regional recipes with the culinary acumen Frank honed while living in France in the 1970s and cooking at Chez Panisse in Berkeley, California; Bottega, which basks in the warmth of Italian flavors; and Chez Fonfon, arguably the truest expression of a French bistro in the American South. Frank and Pardis married in 1995. They live and breathe their work. The joke is that there are tunnels under the city that connect their businesses. They have an uncanny knack for appearing at any of them at will. Pardis will take an instant read of a room while Frank disappears to the stoves.

At this time of year, their menus begin to fill with the galvanizing tastes of spring: English peas, fiddlehead ferns, soft-shell crabs, rhubarb. For Pardis, March is also the time to relish a repast of entirely different flavors: kuku sabzi, a frittata-like baked egg dish dyed emerald green from cilantro, dill, and other herbs; a platter of rice jeweled with bright dried fruits and pistachios; and bean and noodle soup garnished with dried mint and kashk (yogurt's sharper-tongued cousin, made from reconstituted whey).

Nowruz, or Persian New Year, is an annual secular festival timed to the spring equinox. Feasts served over thirteen days in March celebrate rebirth, renewal, and the rewarding complexities of life. For Pardis, who is Iranian-American, *Nowruz* dishes were as indelible to her Alabama upbringing as the farmstead strawberry and asparagus patches that framed Frank's Yellowhammer State childhood.

Born Pardis Sooudi, Stitt and her parents moved to Birmingham in 1971 when she was five. Her parents had emigrated from Tehran in the 1960s so that her father could attend medical school in America. After stints in New York, Houston, and Chicago, the family settled in Birmingham. Dr. Iradj Sooudi took a position as a maxillofacial surgeon at UAB Hospital. "I remember when we first moved here my mother would say, in Farsi, "We've become more Catholic than the Pope," Stitt says. "We wanted to be a 'normal' American family.'"

But if her mother, Parvin, dressed Stitt and her two younger sisters in the polyester styles of the day and sent them off to mainstream children's activities (Stitt studied ballet), at home she kept Iranian culture vital in the family's daily life. The aromas of a simmering Persian stew, or khoresh, would fill the Sooudi household: perhaps fesenjan, chicken in a sweet-and-sour sauce of walnuts and pomegranate molasses; or ghormeh sabzi, a verdant, sumptuous mulch of herbs like fenugreek and parsley cooked with tender kidney beans and often cubed lamb. Rice, simply buttered, or stained with saffron and jeweled with dried fruits and nuts, shared the table with crunchy vegetable salads and homemade yogurt. "My mother didn't know how to cook for five people," says Stitt. "She'd cook for 20. This is still an issue."

Americans who know Persian food mostly through restaurant dining might think the cuisine centers around kebabs. Its breadth stretches much further than skewered meat. The ancient Persian empire (whose regions encompassed what are today parts of India, Egypt, and Greece) reached its apex 2,500 years ago. Persian cooking traditions spread east and west from its crossroad position on the Silk Road to influence global cuisines exponentially.

Domination and dissemination scattered the fundaments of Persian cooking across continents. Zoroastrians, practitioners of a 3,500-year-old monotheistic religion, fled Muslim rule for India beginning in 651 A.D. Their culinary skills shaped the jeweled biryanis and rich meat curries that came to define northern Indian cooking. The crisp, raw salads beloved by Persians became essential elements for the feast of Lebanese small plates called meze; the meat and fruit combinations in Moroccan tagines trace their lineage to the fragrant stews Parvin Sooudi prepared for her family.

Nowruz (often spelled *Norooz*) has been a vital Iranian celebration for thousands of years, adapted over the centuries and observed devotedly across the world. Today, the nationwide Iranian-American population numbers between one million and two million; Michelle Obama hosted a gathering commemorating *Nowruz* at the White House in 2015. Festivities around the Persian New Year revolve around food, certainly. The occasion also marks a time to start fresh. Stitt remembers that her family customarily cleaned every inch of the house. "It was also like Christmas to me," she says. "Buying new clothes and exchanging gifts was part of the ritual."

When Stitt was growing up, the Sooudi family celebrated *Nowruz* with seven or eight other Iranian-American families in Birmingham; her parents held the blowout first-night feast at their house for years. Her mother set a table that hewed closely to the traditions she'd grown up with in Iran. The arrangement is called a sofreh, which every family customizes to their aesthetic. She laid out the banquet on a burgundy ceremonial cloth woven with silvery threads.

As with Easter and Passover meals, many of the foods served during *Nowruz* represent themes associated with springtime. Seven has been a sacred number in Persian culture for millennia, and every sofreh includes haft-seen, or seven symbolic foods, including sabzeh, sprouted grains and grass that signify renewal. Stitt recalls platters of sabzeh all over the house; on the thirteenth day of *Nowruz* they'd throw them into a body of water during a picnic that concludes the festivities. *Nowruz* foods also included sib, or apples, for health; seer, or garlic, to symbolize medicine; senjed, dried fruit to denote the sweetness of love; and samanu, a sweet pudding made from sprouted wheat to represent fertility (Parvin Sooudi flavors hers with saffron.) Each food weaves a narrative. Serkez, or vinegar, connotes patience and wisdom through aging; and sumac, made from dried red berries, symbolizes sunrise and the promise of a new day.

Stitt and her sisters helped color eggs, similar to ones children dye for Easter. One of Stitt's favorite comforting *Nowruz* dishes was ash-e reshteh, a thick soup packed with greens, herbs, beans, and squiggly noodles, which signify the tangles of life and the unraveling of mysteries.

"Mom's sofreh had non-food elements as well," Stitt recalls. "My parents cherished Persian literature, so the table was set with books of poetry and also the Koran, even though we weren't religious. Old Persian coins symbolized prosperity. A goldfish swimming in a bowl represented new life, and a mirror, one that was used as part of my parent's wedding ceremony, indicated self-reflection."

Nowruz was always a rich time of togetherness for the Sooudis, and an intensely social stretch when visitors would constantly come in and out of the house. Stitt didn't feel comfortable inviting non-Iranian friends to *Nowruz* until she was well into her teens. The Iranian hostage crisis in 1979 complicated her high school experience; she remembers some classmates asking if her parents were responsible.

"I was self conscious about being different until college, when I realized those differences made me unique, and that they were actually something to embrace," says Stitt. "What I felt would be perceived as totally bizarre to my American friends—a mid-March New Year's celebration with a roomful of dark-headed foreigners, strange food smells, samovars steaming, lots of double-cheek kissing, and Persian music—was actually fascinating to them, in a good way. It helped me to see my world through others' eyes. It made me proud."

Only recently has Stitt considered that the warmth her parents showed guests during *Nowruz*, and throughout the year, may have helped pave her route toward being a successful restaurateur. "There is a strong parallel between Iranian hospitality and Southern hospitality. Our experience of Iranian culture was having an open home, the sense of never knowing a stranger, that there was enough to feed everyone and everyone was welcome. That's also, I think, the highest expression of our Southernness."

Owing to the constant busyness of her schedule, Stitt hasn't always made it to her family's *Nowruz* celebrations. This year, she reached out to her sisters (both of whom live in New York; her parents still live in Birmingham) to ensure a Sooudi gathering. Everyone committed. Given the current political and social tensions in America, this is an especially poignant time to wash away the dust of the past year, convene at the table, reflect on renewal and relationships, and feast deliciously with loved ones.

Philip Malkus is a freelance writer who has also written for Southern Living *and* Atlanta *magazine. His ideal progressive meal at Frank and Pardis Stitt's Birmingham restaurants would be the stone ground baked grits at Highland's, the lamb porterhouse chop at Bottega, and the coconut cake at Chez Fonfon.*

Kuku sabzi (Iranian herbed frittata)

Adapted from "Food Of Life" by Najmieh Batmanglij

One of Pardis Stitt's favorite comfort foods and an essential dish for *Nowruz*, kuku sabzi can be eaten at any temperature—including cold, for a breakfast on the run. Serve it with yogurt and condiments like hot sauce or harissa. Stitt's mother, Parvin Sooudi, often swaps out the spinach for kale or beet greens (Stitt prefers spinach) but always includes scallions, parsley, cilantro, and dill.

- 8 eggs
- 1 tsp. salt
- ¼ tsp. freshly ground black pepper
- 2 cups spinach, blanched, squeezed dry, and chopped
- 1 cup finely chopped scallions or fresh garlic chives
- 1 cup finely chopped parsley leaves (either curly or Italian flat leaf)
- 1 cup finely chopped cilantro leaves
- 1 cup chopped fresh dill
- 1 Tbsp. dried fenugreek
- ½ cup olive oil

Break the eggs into a large bowl, add the salt and pepper, and beat with a fork. Add the spinach, scallions, chopped herbs, and fenugreek, and mix thoroughly.

In a large nonstick pan, heat the olive oil, then pour in the egg mixture. Cook on medium-low to medium heat, uncovered, until the kuku has set, about 20 to 25 minutes. Cut into wedges in the pan and gently turn each side over, and cook in the pan for another 10 minutes. (You may need to add more oil.) Serves 4 to 6 people.

NORTHWARD BOUND

Detroit's evolving food system has deep Southern roots

by **DEVITA DAVISON**

The author's aunts and uncle in Selma, Alabama

Courtesy of Devita Davison.

I was born to a family of extraordinary cooks,

obsessively preoccupied with food. My maternal great-grandparents owned a general store in Selma, Alabama. My grandparents and parents grew up on farmland their families had worked for generations. They cooked with garden produce, chickens and hogs they raised, and hen house eggs they collected. Growing food, preparing it, and eating it: Through those daily rituals, our family forged bonds and created memories. But then, like so many other African Americans, my family quit the South.

Between 1910 and 1970, more than six million African Americans moved to cities like Detroit from states like Alabama, where they had lived and worked as tenants and sharecroppers. Down South, home was often a dire cabin or clapboard shotgun. Houses lacked glass windows or screens. Bathrooms were often outdoor privies. Water came from wells, springs, and creeks. Detroit promised escape. "I am in the darkness of the South," one Alabama tenant farmer wrote to the *Chicago Defender*, "and I am trying my best to get out."

The First World War ignited the Great Migration. The war drove demand for Northern-made industrial products. By extension, the war drove demands for labor. Recruiters came South to urge blacks to take Northern jobs, promising high wages and better living conditions. Black newspapers like the *Defender* reinforced those messages, encouraging black Southern readers to break free.

From farms and small towns, black men and women boarded the Illinois Central rail line, bound for cities like Cleveland, Chicago, and Detroit. My parents, who arrived in Detroit in the late 1960s, were among those migrants. In Detroit, my father first worked as a day laborer, loading produce trucks at Eastern Market. My mother worked as a maid in the wealthy Detroit suburb of Birmingham. Eventually, my father graduated from Wayne State University with a marketing degree and went on to lead the sales and marketing division for a beauty supply company. My mother graduated from Wayne State University with a business degree and worked for the National Bank of Detroit for 38 years.

My parents left Alabama, the place. They made good lives in Detroit. But they never left Alabama, the ideal. Not altogether. When my father drove to Alabama, he talked of going "down home." That return was about reconnecting with cultural roots and showing off children. For me, the trip was about a shoe box packed with fried chicken, potato salad, and drinks, enjoyed over lunch at tin-topped rest stops. On the drive, my brother and I jockeyed for station wagon seat space, and slept on floor pallets in the way back, as crayons melted in the sun. We watched from a car window, awestruck, as the roads turned to red clay and the pines grew taller and taller. Even though I grew up in Detroit, Alabama resonated. It was about suppers of fresh greens, black-eyed peas, and homemade corn bread, served around four in the afternoon. It was about honeydews and watermelons, picked from a nearby field. It was the sound of rain on a tin roof. And squeaky screen doors, flanked by dirt dobber nests. It was about the dark, about how it gets so black in the country that the stars seem to multiply a thousandfold.

Alabama was about front porches and farm cats and stories of mules and cotton picking. It was about aunts with warm arms and sweet accents. It was about knowing I was going to be bored in the middle of nowhere, where the TV signal was sketchy, but then finding, always, something exciting to explore. No matter how much I came to love Alabama on those trips down home, Detroit was my true home. And I was proud of its history.

OPENING PAGE: The author with products from FoodLab Detroit

Big Mama and Pa, the author's great-grandparents

THE CHILDREN OF MIGRANTS transformed the North. They dominated sports and music. Berry Gordy, the grandson of a white Georgia plantation owner, founded Motown. Running Back Jim Brown, of St. Simons, Georgia, ruled the NFL during a nine-year run with the Cleveland Browns. Those children of migrants also transformed politics in the cities to which their parents moved.

Beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Southern-born mayors took the reigns of Northern cities. By 1967, Walter Washington, born in Dawson, Georgia, the great-grandson of a slave, served

Washington, DC. Kenneth Allen Gibson, born in Enterprise, Alabama, was elected mayor of Newark, New Jersey in 1970. Tom Bradley, born outside Calvert, Texas, also the grandson of a slave, was elected mayor of Los Angeles in 1973. In 1974, nine years after my parents landed in the city, Detroit elected its first black mayor, Coleman A. Young. The eldest of five children, he was born in Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

Many black Southerners migrated north from the Jim Crow South to escape the drudgery of farm work. That said, they couldn't deny the farm knowledge they had accumulated. Recognizing that one of the most effective ways to feed the working poor was to equip them with tools to grow their own, Mayor Young announced, in 1974, the Farm A Lot program. A precursor to urban farming programs of today, the program provided seeds, seedlings, and tools for tilling urban farm patches. And it inspired complementary efforts.

Beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s, an informal network of Detroit grandmothers known as the Gardening Angels set up community gardens to provide refuge and sustenance. These women grew backyard crops for their families. They also grew for homeless shelters and others in need. Working vacant lots and abandoned industrial sites, they farmed urban Detroit and demonstrated how that work reconnected their children of the asphalt to the earth.

This Detroit history motivates me, today, to change perspectives about food and encourage difficult conversations about race and capitalism. Detroit is the right place to do this work. The Detroit urban agriculture movement is now recognized worldwide for its training programs and initiatives, ranging from bio-intensive growing strategies to solar passive greenhouses. Detroiters now recognize the value of vacant land. Residents have turned abandoned lots into productive agricultural resources. Mini farmers markets are springing up citywide, providing Detroiters with fresh, organic food.

I GREW UP IN DETROIT, AFTER the 1967 rebellion, at a time when whites were fleeing the city, and auto manufacturing closures had hit the workforce hard. Much of the current rhetoric about those moments conveniently ignores race, concentrating instead on macro-economic trends. Usually when race is addressed as a cause for Detroit's decline, the phrases used are "racial tensions" or "the racial divide." Nonsense. Detroit blacks have suffered sustained and systemic racial discrimination. Even today, the blatant racial separation in Detroit affects food access and drives health disparities.

Today, I get my agricultural inspiration from Detroit. I look to the courageous, conscious people now developing and testing models of prosperity for people of color, defined by networks of corner stores, sanctuary restaurants, and food cooperatives. I am inspired by Detroit activists, deeply rooted in the soil and committed to building community. And I am inspired by Detroit, where the children and grandchildren of so many Southerners now live and work and strive.

As a descendant of sharecroppers and a daughter of the Great Migration, I work aggressively to strengthen the value chain of culturally appropriate foods. Working in Detroit, I focus on sovereignty, accessibility, and availability. At FoodLab Detroit, a membership-based network of 200-plus food processing and retail businesses, we strengthen the local food economy, promote healthy lifestyles, and build businesses that make a positive

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *The author and her brother during a snowy Detroit winter; road tripping to Alabama from Detroit and showing off the new family car; the author as a young girl in Detroit; her grandmother's 85th birthday in Detroit; a FoodLab Detroit meeting; summer vacations in Gulf Shores, Alabama*

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The author's aunt's and uncle's home in Mobile, Alabama; her grandmother cooking supper in Alabama; her grandfather with a slab of ribs; with her dad and brother at Easter; home-style barbecue on the front lawn in Bessemer, Alabama; Plum Street Market garden in Detroit; old family home in Bessemer

social impact in their community.

We gather around food to talk. We talk at community dinners, in kitchens, and at workshops. Those conversations are the foundation for this resilient community we are constructing. Working alongside each other, seeing and valuing what each other does, we heal our relationships. We share in successes and lift each other up. We give voice to stories muted in the margins. And we celebrate.

At one of our monthly meetings, a new visitor took me aside to say this was the first gathering of entrepreneurs she'd attended in Detroit that referenced racism or income inequality. I know these conversations are uncomfortable for some of our members. To encourage dialogue, we maintain a welcoming environment, offering value and benefits to entrepreneurs, while staying committed to dialogue and creative action.

WE BELIEVE THAT DIVERSE, locally owned and operated businesses are key drivers in vibrant, resilient, healthy communities. In Detroit, where too many African-Americans suffer from preventable diet-related illnesses, our member business Detroit Vegan Soul, serves a plant-based diet of nutrient-dense leafy greens and legumes like butter beans and black-eyed peas. They inspire many, demonstrating how to use the power of their business to solve health and environmental challenges.

Those of us who work in the Detroit urban agricultural movement are clear about tangible benefits. Our work provides fresh nutritious food, beautifies neighborhoods, creates social capital, advances economic development, stabilizes communities, and provides sustainability. Our work provides concrete examples of alternative, value-oriented means of securing our livelihoods.

As an activist, organizer, and nonprofit leader working for food, economic, and environmental justice, I seek to honor the urban agricultural movement in Detroit for its role in leading me back to my culture, back to where I come from. It has been in the spaces of food justice; the garden, the kitchen, the market, the land, that my ancestors have re-visited me, whispering universal knowledge that strengthens my blood, my hair, and my hands.

I come from Black people who grew their own fruits and vegetables, ate whole foods, and emphasized what we now call food sovereignty. Today, I regret that I have lost a connection with Southern foodways. I don't just miss the collards and sweet potato pies. I mourn the neck bones and pig's feet. I regret that I can't whip up souse from scratch like my Big Mama used to. My niece may never eat this food. She doesn't need to head "down home" to visit extended family. Her parents are Northern. And so is she.

We first- and second-generation Northerners use shorthand to describe our unique cultural experiences "down South." That shorthand is now slipping into disuse. Those links are now breaking. As the generations roll on, descendants are unmooring from "the old country." It makes me melancholy. I hope I never ever forget the great effort that my ancestors made to leave the South. May I never forget the perseverance, courage, and suffering they endured to make Detroit a place of safety and freedom and agricultural possibility.

Devita Davison is executive director of FoodLab Detroit, a nonprofit working to make good food a reality for all Detroiters.

by DAVID HAGEDORN

NOTHING GREEN BUT THE PLATES

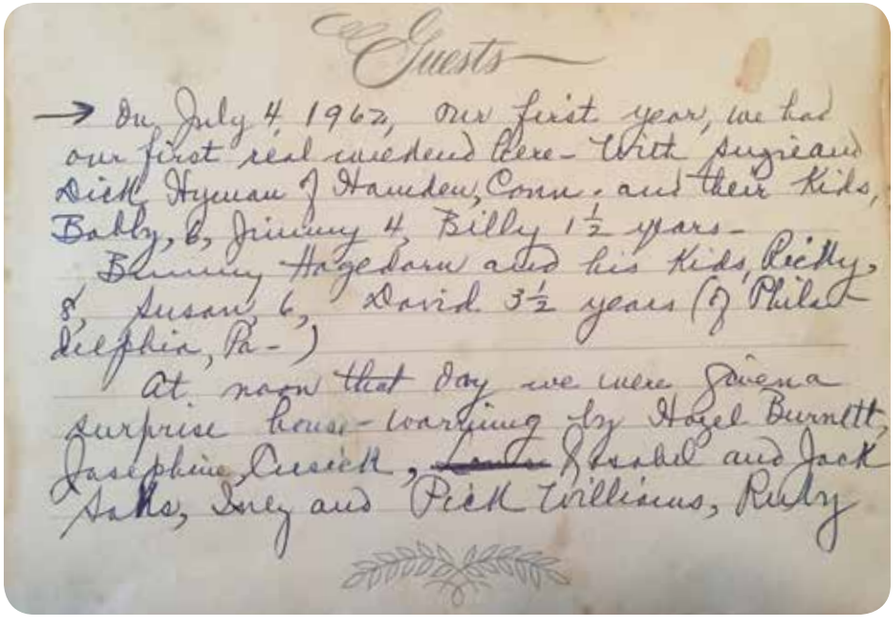
SIREN SONGS OF AN ALABAMA LAKE HOUSE

"DAVID IS A BABY! A BIG BABY!"

declares my sister Susan on August 16, 1964 in the oldest of seven, musty, mismatched guest books lying on the living room coffee table of my family's country house on Lake Guntersville. The lake flows through the pine-dense, red clay Appalachian foothills of Northeast Alabama.

Whenever we Hagedorns gather there over the Fourth of July to spend time with our father and stepmother, to tell stories, relax, drink daiquiris, and eat good food (God, the food!), there comes a time, usually on a rainy afternoon or after dinner when there is a captive audience. Someone pores through the guest books and reads the most entertaining (meanest) remarks out loud. My sister's observation about her five-year-old brother, written in the tentative cursive of an eight-year-old, always makes the cut and gets a laugh. I don't mind now, though surely I did then, because if I'm being honest, she was right.

Most of the sources of pleasure at the lake—swimming, water-skiing, boating, and fishing—amounted to a hotbed of dangers to me. I was convinced I'd drown in the lake's dark green water, where water moccasins lied in wait in gooey milfoil that would swallow me up if a tiny piece of it ever grazed my foot. If the bogeyman existed, he lived in Guntersville, either right outside the window of the room where we kids slept or in the tar black water by the dock.


Guests

→ On July 4, 1962, our first year, we had our first real weekend here - With Suzie and Dick Hyman of Hamden, Conn. and their kids, Bobby, 6, Jimmy 4, Billy 1½ years -

Jimmy Hagedorn and his kids, Ricky, 8, Susan 6, David 3½ years (of Philadelphia, Pa -)

At noon that day we were given a surprise house-warming by Hazel Burnett, Josephine, Dick, Lewis, Isabel and Jack Sikes, Suzy and Dick Williams, Ruby

Courtesy of David Hagedorn

LEFT: The author (far right) with his brother and sister on "The Chickadora"; OPPOSITE PAGE: The inaugural lake house guest book entry

I refused to swim, especially in the middle of the lake, until my father put me in the water while a boat full of people looked on. I'd grab the bottom of the ladder attached to the side of the boat and beg for him to not make me let go, lest I float away in my puffy orange life vest and never be seen or heard from again. We went through this exercise until I finally shed that fear, trading up to a new one: learning how to water-ski. I famously mimed skiing inside the boat until I was nine and Dad insisted I do it for real. He'd get out in the water with me, holding onto a cushion so he could float while I attempted over and over to get up and then stay up without falling.

"I finally went skiing today, and made it!" I wrote on July 6, 1968.

By college, I rarely spent time at the lake. My vacation tastes tended, at an early age, toward nice hotels in Europe. I came out as gay during my junior year in Paris in the late seventies and never looked back once I returned to Washington and finished my degree in foreign service at Georgetown University. I stayed in Washington, embarking on a career as a chef and restaurateur and then a writer.

Every now and then throughout my adult life, I'd take Northern friends to the lake, once I could convince them that they wouldn't be met at the plane by Klansmen. They discovered the lake's beauty and quickly came to appreciate that there wasn't anything else to do there but to relax, read, laugh, drink, and eat. They'd sign the guest book after their stay, as hundreds had before them, thank the Hagedorns for the marvelous time, remark on the quality and abundance of the food, and plan another visit there.

In recent years, the health of my father and stepmother has declined. It breaks my heart to watch my father robbed one by one of the activities he enjoyed most in life. Getting him into the boat or into and out of the water for a swim turned into time-consuming productions, then into impossibilities. Now he can't even make it down to the dock, barely mustering the energy to maneuver his walker from the back bedroom to the porch. The porch is where we savor morning coffee and stare at the placid water. It's where we gather at happy hour to drink frozen lime daiquiris, eat Chex party mix (Hagedorn crack cocaine), Brie (his favorite cheese), and guacamole and Tostitos while we fire up the Weber for dinner, watch another gloriously gilded magenta sunset, and insult each other mercilessly and lovingly.

My siblings and I will soon have to decide what to do when the house, which needs to be rebuilt, passes to us. The decision is clear to me from the cold distance of Washington; it makes no sense to invest in a house that my husband and I would go to only a couple

of weeks a year, and to maintain it from afar by committee. But once I get to the cabin and smell the okra frying or hear the whirring of the White Mountain echoing through the pines with its promise of peach ice cream, my steely resolve turns into fluid sentimentality.

I came to terms long ago with fears and recriminations in Guntersville that seemed great and turned out small. Like the time when I was eighteen and a family member watched a news report about a gay rights march in San Francisco and hissed at the screen, "Those people should be shot!"

Time, education, and love turned that person around, but now in Alabama, public officials and religious zealots deny the validity of my marriage (performed by Ruth Bader Ginsburg, no less) and threaten my safety. In our new reality, once polite people have been given permission and incentive to voice their hatred and ignorance and call people strangers in their own land. Now I'm faced with a new bogeyman, more real than any I imagined lurking in the lake.

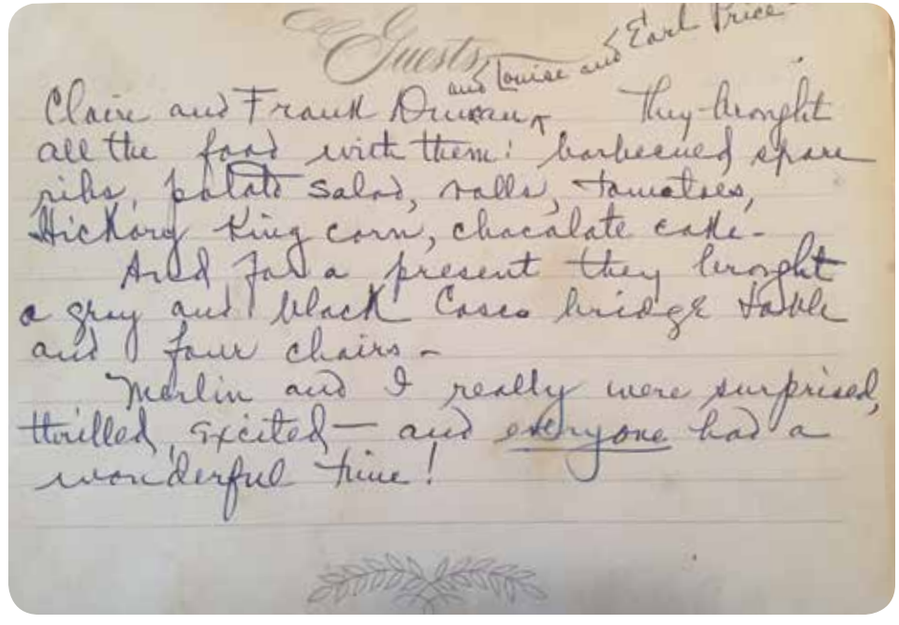
Part of the Tennessee River, Lake Guntersville is a 69,000-acre, manmade reservoir created by the Tennessee Valley Authority in 1939. Many families from Gadsden, forty miles southeast of the town of Guntersville, and Huntsville, forty miles northwest, bought waterfront country houses there. As family lore goes, in 1962, friends of my grandparents, Ruth and Merlin Hagedorn, or, as we kids called them, Gogney and Pop Pop, told them of a three-bedroom pine cabin a few inlets away. It was for sale, completely furnished down to a set of hunter green Homer Laughlin dinnerware in the kitchen and an eighteen-foot mahogany Chris Craft motorboat.

"You'll buy that house over my dead body!" Pop Pop told my grandmother. She bought it the next day for $19,000, naming the boat "The Chickadora," for Pop Pop, whose card-playing buddies at the Gadsden country club called him Chick. She named the house "Ruth Haven."

Gogney made that decision largely because her son, my father, had gotten divorced the year before and she thought the lake would be a nice place for him to take Susan, our older brother Ricky, and me. We had moved to Philadelphia with our mother. Per the custody agreement, we were to live with her and attend school and spend Christmas, Easter, and summer vacations with Dad.

My grandmother, in her bold, dramatic script, set the scene at Ruth Haven with a prologue in the opening pages of the first guest book, where she described the inaugural summer there with my father, nicknamed Bunny since he was a little boy, my siblings, aunt, uncle, and three cousins:

On July 4, 1962, our first year, we had our first real weekend here. With Suzie and Dick Hyman of Hamden, Conn. And their kids, Bobby, 6, Jimmy, 4, Billy, 1 ½ years. Bunny Hagedorn and his kids, Ricky, 8, Susan, 6, David 3 ½ years (of Philadelphia, Pa.)


Guests, Louise and Earl Price
Claire and Frank Duncan. They brought all the food with them: barbecued spare ribs, potato salad, rolls, tomatoes, Hickory King corn, chocolate cake.
And for a present they brought a gray and black Cosco bridge table and four chairs.
Merlin and I really were surprised, thrilled, excited — and everyone had a wonderful time!

At noon that day, we were given a surprise house-warming by Hazel Burnett, Josephine Cusack, Rosabel and Jack Saks, Inez and Pick Williams, Ruby Claire and Frank Duncan, Louise and Earl Price. They brought all the food with them: barbequed spare ribs, potato salad, rolls, tomatoes, Hickory King corn, chocolate cake.

And for a present they brought a gray and black Cosco bridge table and four chairs. Merlin and I really were surprised, thrilled, excited—and everyone had a wonderful time!

The enduring and constant allure that unites everyone at the lake, and keeps me coming back, is the love we shared at the dining room picnic table, where glass stains indicate age like the rings on the trees it was made from. The meals endure, too. Fourth of July dinner isn't much different now than it was in 1962, when there was nothing green on the table but those Homer Laughlin plates.

On that day in 1962, I began my long and complicated relationship with the lake, sometimes a haven and sometimes a jail, where conflicting feelings of joy and anguish, tranquility and anxiety, insouciance and terror came together and separated like a finicky vinaigrette.

I was a misfit in Alabama from the start, a Jewish kid born in Gadsden's Holy Name of Jesus Hospital. Unlike my brother and sister who had developed roots and friends in Alabama before my parents divorced, I was a tabula rasa. My mother blamed my father and grandmother for the demise of her marriage and pleaded her case against them regularly. The anger and resentment took to me like thin gravy to a plain biscuit. I sopped it all up. Whenever it came time to go to Alabama, drama broke out. I'd always show up there a bundle of fear and apprehension.

I was effeminate, gay from the get-go. Attempts to dress me in army uniforms or Native American headdresses made me miserable, as early Christmastime photographs bear out. I was more interested in playing beauty shop and making

RIGHT: Ruth Haven, circa 1976; OPPOSITE PAGE: Ruth Haven feasts memorialized by Gogney

LEFT TO RIGHT: Barbara, the author's stepmother, trims okra; Lake Guntersville

cakes in the Easy Bake oven with my sister and her friends than catching a ball with my brother. When Dad came home from work and switched the TV to sports, that was my exit cue.

Other children in Alabama considered me an oddity and a Yankee to boot. I had no friends. So food became my friend. Before I worked through my phobias and learned to enjoy swimming and skiing, eating food and helping to prepare it was an activity I could participate in fully. At the lake, there was plenty of food, all of it wonderful. Any rules against eating too many sweets or drinking too many Cokes seemed to vanish there. The adults were too busy socializing and partying to pay much attention to us kids, and we took full advantage of it. By the time I hit middle school, I had what Dad called Dunlop's disease. ("Your belly done lopped over your belt!")

Dad married my stepmother Barbara in 1967. My half-sister Aimee was born in 1969. Barbara worked full time as a nurse anesthetist, but took on many of the preparations for the lake, beginning early in the week. She'd go grocery shopping and run errands after work, make dinner, do the dishes, then boil eggs or shuck corn, whip up a broccoli-rice, asparagus-pea, or hash brown potato casserole and make a gallon of custard base to churn into ice cream if Chilton County peaches were in season.

Certain foods were *de rigueur*. German potato salad, made by layering sliced, boiled, and peeled potatoes, sliced red onions, white vinegar, vegetable oil, sugar, salt, and pepper in a huge green Tupperware bowl and topping the affair with paprika and chopped parsley, was non-negotiable and still is. When I later became a chef and performed the cardinal sin of substituting olive oil for vegetable oil in the potato salad to jazz it up, I was mercilessly denounced and ridiculed. Now when Barbara's Tupperware lands on the table and I'm there, everybody delights in calling it "Barbara's Better Than David's Potato Salad."

Other staples, in addition to canned biscuits, various breads, and a few pounds of bacon and pork sausage, would have included tomato and red onion salad, a Cure 81 ham for lunch, fixings for bloody Marys, and spare ribs or a Boston butt for barbecue. To go with it, we relied on Ruth Hick's thirty-two-ingredient barbecue sauce, the specialty of a respected home cook who used to be a neighbor of ours in Gadsden. (The secret ingredient was spiced peaches.)

The preparation we went through for a thirty-six-hour trip now seem ridiculous. On Saturday morning we would eat breakfast and then Dad would load up the car, exercising considerable legerdemain to fit all the food, suitcases, beer, and liquor. The alcoholic beverages had to be concealed for the trip from one dry county to another lest we got pulled over for speeding and the Highway Patrol decided to have a look in the trunk. The coolers containing the perishables had to be easily accessible so Dad could fill them with ice when we made our first stop at the Little Giant food store, a mere five minutes from the house. The meat at their butcher counter was top quality, so Dad would often pick up a couple of two-inch-thick sirloin steaks and some ground beef for hamburgers.

CONFLICTING FEELINGS OF JOY AND ANGUISH, INSOUCIANCE AND TERROR CAME TOGETHER AND SEPARATED LIKE A FINICKY VINAIGRETTE.

We were rarely on the road much before noon. Our route took us from Etowah County into Marshall County, past Boaz and then through Albertville and past the billboard that indicated we were passing through "the Heart of Sand Mountain." Susan and I spent most of our time trying to avoid being tortured by Ricky. When we passed Jack's Hamburgers, we'd launch into their jingle, changing the words from "Jack's ham-BUR-gers for FIF-teen cents are so GOOD, GOOD, GOOD, you'll go BACK, BACK, BACK to JACK, JACK, JACK for MORE MORE MORE!" to "Jack's hamburgers for FIF-teen cents are so BAD, BAD, BAD, you'll go BACK, BACK, BACK to JACK, JACK, JACK for your MUH-NEE back!"

Any fuss in the back seat ended when one of us kids caught sight of the lake.

"First to see the lake! First to see the lake!" someone would scream as we drove down the mountain and through Guntersville, a town of some sixty-five hundred souls in the late 1960s. (And fifty-two churches.) Turning onto Highway 227 and driving past a feed mill, we'd stop at a little market for worms or minnows for fishing and drive over Polecat Creek, turning left onto a dead end dirt road lined on both sides by thick trees. The road became paved once you got to the Agricola's property, because Old Man Agricola, Pop Pop said, had the political clout to get that done.

Once we arrived at the cabin, we kids made a beeline for the candy dishes on the coffee table, which Gogney filled with Hershey's Kisses, M&M's we gorged on, and peppermint wheels we ignored. Dad would have us close all the windows so he could turn on the air-conditioning, against the wishes of our grandparents, who preferred the pine air.

After an hour or two of boating, we'd return to the house, where Gogney had

I CAME TO TERMS LONG AGO WITH FEARS AND RECRIMINATIONS THAT SEEMED GREAT AND TURNED OUT SMALL.

laid out lunch. The vat of potato salad remained on the table unrefrigerated all weekend until the last dregs were gone. With Coke or Hawaiian Punch, we washed down ham and cold cut and cheese sandwiches and piles of potato chips.

After another boat outing, it was cocktail time. Lime daiquiris, frozen Limeade blended with crushed ice and a surfeit of white rum, are a Ruth Haven specialty that Dad introduced in the early years. Making them is a rite of passage once a child hits drinking age and only those who know to double the amount of booze called for in the recipe (to make them "Bunny strength") are entrusted with the task more than once.

When I was seven or eight, I started helping the women put together the happy hour hors d'oeuvres, then took the job over completely when I realized how much attention and praise it earned me. I used a large, round faux-wood platter and fashioned a pie-chart on it with whatever delectables were on hand: pimento cheese-stuffed celery sticks, deviled eggs, a block of cream cheese topped with canned smoked oysters or neon green or red peppery jelly, skinless boneless sardines with slivers of red onion, Braunschweiger, jarred olives, and pickled okra. On another platter, I'd make a kaleidoscopic display of Ritz Crackers, Sociables, and Triscuits.

Dinner grilling duties fell to Dad, who was often impaired by the daiquiris and poor outdoor lighting by the time the fire was ready. We'd all be gathered at the table, already piling on the side dishes when he'd come in from the porch with a cookie sheet of hamburgers and steaks, charcoal black on the outside and blood rare on the inside. God help anyone who attempted to put ketchup on a steak in front of him. Dessert would be ice cream, if some had been churned earlier in the day, watermelon, and perhaps a towering Milky Way, caramel, or chocolate cake sent over by one of my grandmother's friends.

The rituals at the lake played out in this way, more or less, through the decades, with successive generations assuming their roles. Pop Pop died in 1984, Gogney in 1989. Today, Dad starts stocking the freezer with steaks, ribs, pork butt, bacon, and sausage months in advance of the Fourth of July holiday, when all his children descend with their families. We perform the cooking duties so Dad and Barbara can relax as much as possible.

It's the Fourth of July. I'm eating dinner at the crowded dining room table, looking across the living room at Aimee's children, my six-year-old nephew Sam, and his eight-year-old sister Liz. They're sitting at the gray and white Cosco bridge table like my siblings and I did when the cabin was full of people, happily gnawing on sweet corn and barbecued ribs. The oil from the German potato salad is bleeding through the paper plates onto their wicker underliners and it's clear to me in this moment what the future of Ruth Haven must be. I am, once and forever, a baby. A big baby.

David Hagedorn is a former chef and restaurateur who now writes in Washington, DC. His latest book, Rasika: Flavors of India*, will be published by HarperCollins in September.*

Andrew Thomas Lee

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Tim Hontzas of Johnny's; Ted's restaurant; Tasos Touloupis of Ted's Restaurant; barbecue from Demetri's

THE BIRMINGHAM GREEKS

FROM SOUVLAKI TO HOT DOGS, BAKLAVA TO SNAPPER THROATS, AND BARBECUE TO MEAT-AND-THREES, THE SOUTH AND GREECE INTERTWINE IN ALABAMA.

In 2004, SFA collected oral histories of Greek restaurant owners who had been feeding Birmingham since the nineteenth century. Their establishments have served as employment centers and immigration draws. From their progeny, a sprawling Greek family tree has grown. With the help of Eric Velasco, SFA has updated that oral history project, revisiting previous interviews and chronicling the lives of a new generation of Greek restaurateurs now shaping the food culture of the Magic City. Here's a small taste of the restaurateurs who have defined the city. Look for the fully revised and updated Greeks in Birmingham oral history collection to debut on our website in May.

TIM HONTZAS

JOHNNY'S

Tim Hontzas descends from the Hontzopoulous family (shortened to Hontzas in the 1950s) who made their mark on meat-and-threes after opening Niki's Downtown (1951) and Niki's West (1957). Tim's grandfather, Johnny Hontzas, established Johnny's Restaurant in 1954 with his father, Connie, in Jackson, Mississippi. Tim opened Johnny's in Homewood in 2012. SFA Pihakis Documentary Fellow Ava Lowrey has completed a short film, Johnny's Greek and Three, *focused on Johnny's. Like all SFA films, it is available on our website.*

They say at one point in the seventies that if it weren't for the Greeks, Birmingham would starve. Greeks had a very strong relationship with farmers, because if they weren't in the produce business, they were in the restaurant business. I think that's what has inspired meat-and-threes and the Greek influence on that.

I'm Greek-Southern and I don't think I had a choice but to cook. I was always being dragged in and out of kitchens at restaurants in Jackson: The Mayflower, The Elite, Angelo's. My dad always asked me to come back into the kitchen with him and hear the old men discuss all kinds of crazy things.

The name comes from my *papou*'s restaurant in Jackson. I wanted to do it in homage of him. They said that he was way ahead of his time when he opened Johnny's, but was very hardheaded and let time pass him.

He jumped a cattle boat in 1921 and came to the United States. I'm not sure how many days he was on that boat, but I imagine it was not a friendly journey. He arrived in New Orleans with seventeen dollars in his pocket. He just walked into a kitchen one day and asked if he could start washing dishes.

Tim Hontzas at Johnny's

They gave him a shot, and he just worked his way up. The goal was to take a chance on one kid and to send them over and see if they could make a way for themselves. And he was able to do it, which in turn, goes back to how they were able to help bring other people over and how Johnny's was an outpost. With a little bit of money he opened a small little cafe outside of a train depot in McComb, Mississippi, which was one of the largest in the South. He did well there and then he opened up a place called The Plaza Café. It did well and then he explanted into Johnny's.

Meat-and-threes: To me, it's who we are without forgetting our roots. The Greeks have all kinds of restaurants now. It's not just meat-and-threes and hotdogs. It's seafood, it's barbecue, it's all kinds of stuff. I love it here, my family, all the Greeks—as ornery and temperamental as they can be—I love Birmingham. *—As told to Ava Lowrey in January 2017*

TASOS AND BEBA TOUPLOUPIS

TED'S

In 2000, Ted Sarris sold Ted's to Tasos and Beba Touploupis. Tasos immigrated from Thessaloniki to Alabama for college, where he met Beba, who was born in the Bahamas to Greek parents from Kalymos who worked in the sponge industry. Under the guidance of "Mr. Ted," they've made the place their own, holding on to some traditions since the restaurant opened in 1960, and making new efforts to capture newer generations in a changing Birmingham with dishes like chicken Bahama, stir-fried with red bell peppers and onions.

Tasos Touloupis at Ted's

Tasos Touloupis: When I came over here, I got involved with Alabama football. I fell in love with the culture. I graduated in 1983 with a bachelor's of science in aerospace engineering, and right now I'm making collard greens. It takes a rocket scientist to do that, you know.

Beba Touloupis: Tasos came here for his education, I came for my education, and want to do better, and we have. We've worked. We've put our kids in great schools. They're first-generation Americans, and they will, hopefully, hope [for even better].

TT: Mr. Ted didn't have any

Tasos and Beba Touloupis at Ted's Restaurant

buyers. And what he wanted was to find a Greek who will appreciate his recipes, who will continue the tradition, and he fell in love with me and my attitude of, "I'm not going to change anything. I want *exactly* the same recipes." I fell in love immediately with the atmosphere. It was a very well-oiled machine... Anybody who comes in this country and has one vision to work hard, to raise the family, and make money, I guarantee you he will do that. And Mr. Ted did it all by himself with limited education.

BT: We have customers here that Mr. Ted had as customers, and part of our challenge is, we do having an aging population and we have a group of millennials out there who don't even know what a meat-and-three is. For us to continue being relevant as Birmingham is growing, we have to grow the customer base... We didn't know what Birmingham was until we had Ted's. We got to experience Birmingham.

TT: The squash casserole is brand new. Mr. Ted used to have just the regular squash, regular broccoli. So we have that. In addition to yams, we introduced my wife's recipe, the roasted sweet potatoes with rosemary; they're a little healthier. But the number one vegetable for every catering is the mac and cheese. It's a Greek recipe, I use a Greek sauce. If you have a question, you need to come and taste it and then we'll talk. —*As told to Eric Velasco in January 2017*

Pork souvlaki, squash casserole, broccoli, and banana pudding at Ted's

DEMETRI NAKOS

DEMETRI'S

Demetri Nakos arrived in Birmingham from the island of Corfu, Greece in 1955. He worked for an uncle who ran Oakland Barbecue, feeding Ensley steelworkers on the city's west side. With a business partner he opened El Rancho in 1961 in Homewood. Eleven years later he opened his namesake restaurant in the same neighborhood. Nakos passed away in 2002. His son Sam Nakos

Demetri's in Homewood

continues to carry on his father's legacy, always hiring Greek pitmasters.

Greeks barbecue lamb in Greece, so barbecue is not unusual in Greece. They cook over open charcoal or open wood, but here it's a hickory flavored smoke thing. You're never going to find a restaurant in Greece that has smoked meat. It's not part of their traditional cuisine. So dad learned the smoke process.

My dad called me up when I was eight years old when his dishwasher didn't show up. My mother would bring me down here, and I'd be crying the whole way but I came. I was nineteen when I finally clocked in and never went back to college. I'd make the pies, and then when the meat cutter went on vacation I cut meat. And if anybody was sick I cooked. After all those years you learn how to flip the ribs and you start to get a feel for it. A lot of it's feel. My dad was a great cook. We would cook things together back here.

In Greece they know good food. I think God gave Greeks a palate and I think he also gave them a very hard work ethic and these guys from other countries when they come over to America and they see opportunities they snag it and they're dedicated. They come over and they know how to cook. When you get in the restaurant business it's like being in a boxing ring. It's serious. And Greeks are willing to do it. They're high strung and they have tons of energy and they're willing to put up with all the other things that go along with the restaurant business and survive in it because they're dedicated. They don't get defeated very easily.

Birmingham has been great to us. It's a great place to have a restaurant and a great place to live and also people are very receptive to our food. I think Demetri's has helped shape and define barbecue for the whole South because I feel like Birmingham is a very strong area for barbecue. I think we've helped define it right here. *—As told to Jake York in 2004*

Sam Nakos of Demitri's

TORTAS IN TUSCALOOSA

MEMORY AFTER A STORM

by Caleb Johnson

Taqueria Jaripeo, in 2010.

Change comes in many forms. During the spring in Alabama it sometimes comes from the horizon, a funnel-shaped cloud descended from the gray-slabbed sky. So it happened on April 27, 2011, when an EF-4 tornado approached Tuscaloosa from the south and west.

You can lose yourself in the numbers from that day. The storm lasted more than seven hours, traveled almost 400 miles. The tornado, which killed 52 people in Tuscaloosa alone, grew to be a mile and half wide. Winds at 190 miles-per-hour destroyed 12 percent of the city, including much of the neighborhood where my favorite Mexican restaurant, Taqueria Jaripeo, used to be.

On a Saturday morning last November, while visiting from my new home in Philadelphia, my buddy Nate and I pulled over next to the vacant lot where Taqueria Jaripeo once stood. It was the first time I'd visited the spot since moving out of state the summer after the tornado hit. Nate and I ate warm, glazed Krispy Kreme doughnuts while arguing whether the taqueria had been on the left or right end of the mini-mall. All that remained was a portion of the cinderblock wall, the foundation, and parking-lot scabs grown over with yellowed grass. In the wake of the tornado, much of Alberta City (a northeastern suburb of Tuscaloosa) looked this way—as if an enormous hand had slapped the earth.

While I may not remember the exact spot where the restaurant was located, I do, without a doubt, remember Taqueria Jaripeo's chorizo torta. The roll was crispy on the outside, soft on the inside. It could barely hold the avocado, onion, carrot, jalapeno, and sour cream. The chorizo inside was cooked until it resembled rust. Each time you took a bite, the innards dripped all over the plate, and if you weren't careful, onto your lap.

In my early twenties, when I first set foot in Taqueria Jaripeo, I'd never eaten a sandwich like that. Nor had I ever been to a Mexican restaurant in Alabama that didn't specialize in gluey white cheese dip, deep-fried chimichangas, and fajitas served on a sizzling cast iron plate. In addition to tortas, Taqueria Jaripeo offered an exhaustive selection of tacos. I tried lengua and al pastor for the first time there. They served tacos on corn tortillas and dressed them with fresh cilantro and chopped onion. At Taqueria Jaripeo you could wash down your meal with aguas frescas or a Mexican Coca-Cola in a glass bottle that a waitress brought from a cooler in the corner of the rectangular dining room where pictures of Jesus, and other religious icons, hung on the wall. Taqueria Jaripeo was a family business. Two women—the mother and grandmother, I always guessed—worked the kitchen. The father, I figured this man to be, and two or three silent men, often sat eating a tomato-based beef soup at a table near two large windows. These windows faced north across University Boulevard toward Alberta Baptist Church, which had a giant blue and green fiberglass globe atop its sign. That globe is gone now too, though a renovated brick church remains.

For months after the tornado, folks gathered every night at their favorite bars. Mine was Egan's, a smoky little room where, after several drinks, you could acquire the ability to dance like James Brown. One night that summer, two friends introduced me to a young man who I'd never seen in the bar before. A band was playing, though I don't remember which one. All anybody talked about those days was the tornado. Everybody had a story to tell. Of seeing treetops punch holes through roofs, of picking their way down streets snaked with live wires. The young man began shouting his story to us over the music.

His family used to own a Mexican restaurant in town, he said. Now they sold lunches to the countless cleanup and

construction crews. My friends smiled while I pieced things together. Maybe it was the drinks, but meeting this young man felt like more than coincidence. In that moment, it seemed divined. By this time I was already set to move out of state. Everything seemed heightened, everything a potential last or never again. Here I'd been given a chance to tell this young man how much his family's food meant to me—something I'd failed to do any of the times I dined at Taqueria Jaripeo.

I'm sure my words fell short, but the young man appeared happy and proud to hear how his family's restaurant had changed the way I thought about Mexican food. My friends and I bought him whiskey shots and asked when the restaurant would reopen. A foolish question, I now realize. Change had come. Its fulfillment would be the development of high-rise condominiums, chain stores, and restaurants near the University of Alabama campus, not the return of small, family-owned businesses in a neglected, largely Latino neighborhood a couple miles away.

The young man left sometime before the band finished that night, and I never saw him again. It's possible that he, like many Latinos who lost their homes in the tornado, left the state altogether. I remember that night now, and many others from this period in my life, like a burn. I wish I could remember the young man's name.

As Nate and I pulled away from the vacant lot last November, I was glad to have reconnected with my past. Since moving away from the state where I was born and raised, returning to my past has become something of a fetish, though returning usually leaves me feeling worse than the missing does. As Nate and I crossed some railroad tracks, I thought about the first time I went to Taqueria Jaripeo. It was summer and I brought a friend, which I tried to do every time after for the selfish reason that I wanted the restaurant to stay open so I could keep eating there. My friend and I were hungover from a night of drinking and dancing at Egan's. I don't remember what she ordered that day. What I do remember is holding my chorizo torta out for her to taste, how the sandwich spilled itself onto the table when she took a bite.

After lunch we bought canned beers at a gas station then went to swim in a pool at an apartment complex where neither of us lived. We were alone. We drank those beers while standing chest-deep in the piss-warm water. Later, the sky opened up and dumped rain on our heads. We didn't care or dare get out. This was not a storm, but a shower, and we were happily full on Mexican food and beer.

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VIEW FROM THE TREEHOUSE

CHEF JASON ZYGMONT HAS A KICKASS RESUME AND A DISTINCTIVE CULINARY VOICE. BUT IS THAT ENOUGH FOR THE CRITICS?

by John Kessler

Let's start with the dish. This plate is slate gray and heavy, so concave it wants to become a bowl. If you eat out often in restaurants, you know it. Perhaps you remember your futile attempts to balance a knife on its curved rim. Maybe it once held an off-center swoosh of spice-dusted roasted carrots in yogurt, one of those plating designs that looks like yin without its yang. In a different restaurant, that dish might contain a mound of farmstead goodness: Carolina Gold rice grits, Cherokee Purple tomatoes, and heirloom okra topped with an enormously special chicken leg.

At the Treehouse in Nashville, that plate cradles a serving of pasta that looks like a Dale Chihuly glass sculpture and tastes like nothing you've ever eaten. Soft, fat agnolotti filled with puréed caramelized sunchokes wallow like baby hippos in a ruby red cranberry sauce. A scattering of Brussels sprouts' leaves, seared to emerald translucence, crest the top. Even the white shreds that dust the plate bring a surprise; they look like Parmesan but deliver a sinus-clearing dose of horseradish. Everything about this combination of flavors wallops you with surprises. The pasta pillows squish sweetly; the sauce shrieks with fruit acid; the leaves steer the flavors toward bitterness and char. But does it all work?

It's hard to answer that question when the ingredients—the primary tastes themselves—create such a wall of flavor. Did Phil Spector's Wall of Sound strike virgin ears as a mile wide and an inch deep, lush but weirdly shallow, unfathomable because 'fathom' is the wrong word? Or maybe the better musical reference is Prince's "When Doves Cry." This dish is a song belted out with heart-gripping energy but no bass line, a trailblazer of the treble clef. I liked many dishes at the Treehouse better and a few not as well. But the sunchoke agnolotti was what you might call the most Zgymontian, and by the time the waiter cleared the plate, I still hadn't made up my mind about

it. That's a good thing.

Chef Jason Zygmont is 31. You either will or will not be hearing more about him. He's at that point in his career where he is more than a hired gun and less than a marquee chef. Nashville's general dining public knows the restaurant, which was around before Zygmont came on board; Yelpers enthusiastically pitch their thumbs up and down, but rarely notice fresh voices from the kitchen. The local dining crowd, however, recognizes the new auteur in town. *Eater Nashville* named him its 2016 Chef of the Year, citing his "unique" fare and "Instagram-worthy plating." Local food writers applaud his ambition; national food writers... well, they're coming. Or not. They will make the call to put him on the national radar. Or not.

Let me—a writer who parachuted into Nashville for 48 hours and two meals—tell you something about Jason Zygmont. He has worked at the Treehouse for almost a year and a half, where he roasts a very special chicken, indeed, and lacquers pork shanks until they are as shiny as toys. Above all else, he manages to find rare drama in ugly root vegetables. Seriously, you will eat wedges of his twice-cooked celery root in fermented chili emulsion with caramelized onion cream and exclaim, "Celeriac, I hardly knew ye."

Zygmont grew up in Alpharetta, an Atlanta suburb, and attended the University of Georgia. He left school in 2006 and did not, as his parents hoped, parlay his philosophy studies into a law career. The cooking bug had gotten its chompers in. When he wasn't trying to focus on David Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature,* he was glued to *Emeril Live* on television and dreaming his way through *The French Laundry Cookbook*. After college, he put in his sweat equity at one restaurant job, then another, then climbed the Atlanta totem pole. He cooked under Linton Hopkins at Restaurant Eugene, Hugh Acheson at Empire State South, and Kevin Gillespie at Woodfire Grill. At the latter restaurant, I first remember seeing Zygmont in the open kitchen, back when he was a chubby kid with wild hair. I remember walking past him at the end of a slamming night, his face pink from the oven heat. Hunched over, he wolfed a quick plate of food before breaking down his station.

When Zygmont realized he didn't have a lot more to learn in Atlanta, he sent out his resume "to the ten best restaurants in the world" without any expectations. Within two days, he received an offer to *stage* at Noma in Copenhagen, the restaurant that introduced discerning diners to both fried reindeer moss and those slate gray plates as frames for naturalistic new directions in cooking. In other words, jackpot.

Noma's American chef de cuisine at the time, Matt Orlando, took a shine to this young,

Natalie Nelson

Macerated butterkin, black mint, feta, jalapeño, puffed rice

Southern *stagiaire*, starting him in the production kitchen. A quick study, Zygmont was promoted to the test kitchen where he helped the research and development chef make the case for a dish composed of Danish miso, sea snails, elderflower, and raw-ish potatoes.

In 2012, after five months, Zygmont's time was up. Orlando told him, "If you don't do New York now, you won't have the chance again." By "do New York," he meant the top of the global food chain, working in the kind of kitchens that would break anyone who isn't young, energetic, talented, able to weather abuse, and almost pathologically hungry for advancement. He got Zygmont a position as a *commis* at Per Se, the restaurant so high up in the food world it was beyond the top floor. (Like King Kong, it got knocked down last year by an unflattering review in *The New York Times*.)

After experiencing "the highest form of teamwork" at Noma, Zygmont found the kitchen culture at Per Se a shock. "It was militaristic—all about 'get your shit done,' and if not there were six sous chefs there to yell at you," he recalls. "The problem was, you had to figure out how to do one project to make six people happy." He spent more than a year in New York, first at Per Se then Atera, another New York fine-dining fantasia that now charges $275 per dinner and offers "an immersive sensory dining experience" and a $95 "tea progression." He

Jason Zygmont

was working on what he considered "a doctorate in technique," but it came with so much daily stress, bullying, and abuse (a *lot* of shit needs to get done to immerse senses) he didn't think he could hold on much longer.

"I was about to have a fucking panic attack when Hugh Acheson called," he says. His former boss reached out with an offer to take over the kitchen at his flagship restaurant, Five & Ten in Athens, Georgia. "Hugh bailed me out of a bad situation and gave me the biggest promotion of my career," Zygmont says with relief still in his voice. Plus, it had long been his goal to come back South. "I know the farmers; it's the pantry I'm comfortable with."

By the time he got his picture taken for the Five & Ten website, he looked like a different person from the frazzled line cook I saw before. Coiffed, slender, and handsome, he sat on a sofa and stared directly into the camera, his dark-washed jeans cuffed just high enough to display stylish footwear. Enter the chef.

I tried his food once at Five & Ten as a critic for *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* and wasn't quite sure what to make of it. His pan-seared trout was such a stunner—the skin so crisp, the flesh so supple—it could serve as his dissertation for that doctorate in technique. It arrived nestled in a camera-ready tableau of red beets, samphire (salty "sea beans"), and pickled mushrooms.

I think I found a dissonant harmony somewhere in this colorful freakout. But the dish was finished before my thoughts were. I wanted very much to know his cooking better, yet Athens was too far from my home in Atlanta to conduct the level of research (four, five visits?) this tricky food required. Zygmont, I could tell, didn't cook to be loved. He wasn't going to burger you up and bacon you down, and push every fat, salt, and sugar hedonic hotspot in your brain.

So I punted. I wrote the one visit, un-starred, "can't yet make the call" first look review. And I stashed my curiosity. Until now, it felt like unfinished business.

You think you know where this story is going: I describe the dish that makes you ravenous. (Hint: it's 'nduja on toast.) I go on to quote Zygmont extensively (say, about fermentation, his obsession) and make the call to put him on the national radar. But forget about Jason Zygmont for a moment. Since I've introduced a musical analogy, let's change tunes. After all we're in Nashville.

Specifically, we're in East Nashville, which the local tourism authority calls "eclectic" and "hip"—a place with a "low-key vibe and neighborly personality" where you can hear local songwriters perform and drink good coffee. The area has a diffuse feeling, with strips and clusters of retail scattered among Georgian, Victorian, and Cape Cod homes. It's not as pedestrian friendly as the 12South neighborhood, but maybe cooler.

SOFT, FAT AGNOLOTTI FILLED WITH PURÉED CARAMELIZED SUNCHOKES WALLOW LIKE BABY HIPPOS IN A RUBY RED CRANBERRY SAUCE.

The Treehouse lies right in its central thicket, called Five Points, the one place you can't find parking. For nearly 25 years, a legendary fiddle player lived in this house. Session musician Buddy Spicher (pronounced "spiker") recorded with everyone from Dolly Parton to Bill Monroe, from Johnny Paycheck to George Jones. If you can hear in your mind the lush string chords framing Linda Ronstadt's voice in "Long Long Time," that's Spicher. He personally built the restaurant's namesake tree house, now used for small parties.

In 2013 Spicher's son and grandson transformed the space

with the intention of making it into a late-night industry hang for Nashville's burgeoning cadre of chefs and waiters. They reclaimed a lot of wood and found materials (old doorknobs, flashlights), kept the building's meandering quirkiness and put the small bar front and center. They opened with the chef Todd Alan Martin, who played with crowd-pleasing Latin American flavors.

ZYGMONT IS NO UMAMI FREAK EAGER TO BLISS-BLAST EVERY DISH WITH PARMESAN AND SOY SAUCE. HIS SENSIBILITY VEERS MORE SOUR-SWEET.

Right across the street from the Treehouse lies white-tablecloth Margot Café & Bar, which is not the kind of restaurant visiting food writers often mention because it holds no news value and appeals to baby boomers. But it remains significant because owner-chef Margot McCormack jump-started the East Nashville restaurant scene here 15 years ago.

Why talk about all this? Because someone familiar with the context of this restaurant (a local critic, say) would take it all into account. A musician sees the Treehouse in a different light from a chef. The young woman and East Nashville resident I brought to my first visit found the Treehouse much improved from her pre-Zygmont meal 18 months prior. ("I've got to bring my husband!" she enthused.) The next night I returned with a mother of grown children who drove from across town. She waited a minute for me out front and saw chef Margot through a window across the street, bustling about her kitchen. That made her happy. That was her restaurant. Her daughter, she said, liked the Treehouse.

Neither woman had heard of Zygmont before entering the restaurant. Both left fans.

A strong voice sets the tone of his menu, which feels local and seasonal, vegetable-forward, very much of the South but untethered from anything resembling repertory. Order shareable plates, and they become an impromptu tasting menu, a game of palate pong.

There are pink slices of house-cured lonzino hiding beneath a tumble of grilled rutabaga matchsticks and a sour apple relish. Grilled parsnip lengths loll in blackberry preserves, but you can't let down your guard because lashings of bitter dandelion and fermented pecan add a well-earned menace. (Parsnips do have an unsettling personality.) Fingerling sweet potatoes from a local farm share a bowl rich she-crab broth with smoked trout roe and peanuts.

Jason Zygmont

Zygmont plays: Grilled king mackerel, fermented green tomato buerre blanc.

And then there's that 'nduja on toast, sourdough rusks dappled with the spicy Sicilian pork spread, burrata cheese, gushy persimmon, and minty basil. You want to dance to these flavors.

Zygmont seems less focused on the perfect bite than other chefs. He's no umami freak eager to bliss-blast every dish with Parmesan and soy sauce. He will never develop a famous hamburger. His sensibility veers toward that Scandinavian—dare I say "New Nordic?"—sour-sweet axis. "Acidity is what I most crave," he says, adding, "A dish doesn't need to be completely balanced. You pick up a taste in one course and find it in the next."

And he ferments like he's a newly discovered species of bacteria: *Zgymonti bacillus*. He spices sauce with fermented turnip juice, which tastes like horseradish, or eviscerates the richness of richly braised beef cheek with fermented green strawberries. He loves warm flavors but has a cold A.F. sensibility. I dig it.

One can focus on the shareable plates on his menu or go large and get a "family style" meal. That might be an entire roasted chicken with a side of black-charred broccoli and a salad of shaved radishes and dandelion greens. Let me cheer that chicken from Quarter Springs Farm—bathed in a reduced *glace*—the chickeny-est experience of all my years. And let me cheer those sides, so bittersweet and serious, such a slap of vegetal funk, that they cut right to the core of this meal, that place where dirt meets appetite.

As an old-school critic I am a consumer advocate who has researched this menu enough to recommend it, with some reservations. Zygmont can deliver bristling invention and deep satisfaction, but he also dares you to make up your own damn mind.

I worry that so much restaurant writing today has migrated from local to national, and thus become travel writing. Critics cull their meals to curate experiences for the reader. Nashville becomes the cheeseburger at Husk (which is toe-curlingly wonderful), the tasting menu at the Catbird Seat, the line at Biscuit Love.

All fine. I get it. But I do wonder where the discourse is headed. We need chefs who push and critics who push back. Otherwise we are like those plates, framing the chef's narrative, rather than challenging it.

John Kessler was the longtime dining critic for the Atlanta Journal-Constitution. *He currently serves as the chairman of the James Beard Foundation journalism awards committee and is working on a book with The Giving Kitchen, an Atlanta nonprofit. He lives in Chicago.*

VIRGINIA'S DARE

HOW A COOKING COMPETITION IN OLD DOMINION IN 1948 UNWITTINGLY SET THE TONE FOR MODERN FOOD JOURNALISM

By Hanna Raskin

I'M NOT SURE IF THIS still happens in the age of peanut allergies, but when I was in school, class projects involved groceries. We built maps out of pretzels and solar systems out of pistachios. And while I don't remember studying the history of food media with my second-grade newspaper advisor, Mrs. Jackson, I can imagine putting together a gingerbread house to illustrate the topic.

That's pretty consistent with our sense of how the genre developed over the late twentieth century. We started with a basic journalistic structure, meaning we mostly wrote service pieces and editorials about the scarcity of certain duck breeds and the rising price of oysters. And then talented writers adorned the model, embellishing it with adventure, opinion, ethics and diversity. So by the year 2000, food writing had been built into a pretty fantastic form. Good for us.

Except that's not how history works. It's not cumulative. In other words, forget the gingerbread house. Instead, picture a fruitcake, all dense and mysterious. It has good parts; it has bad parts and all of them are baked in from the first and bound to last. That's food journalism: An eternally complex mass of achievements and mistakes.

I could cherry-pick examples from the past century, but it's more instructive to focus on one moment smack dab in the middle: The second annual Virginia Chefs' Tournament, held during the last week of March 1948.

The tournament was a cooking competition, designed by the state to showcase Virginia food and its resident ritziest chefs. In many ways, though, it was all about food media. Specifically, it was a study in what food media covered and how they covered it.

To serve as judges, the tournament assembled a panel of the nation's top food writers and broadcasters. Through their daily work, and in their approach to the contest assignment, they displayed a few of the best qualities in food journalism: They were skeptical, aware, connected to their audiences, concerned about the world-at-large, and willing to be wrong. Most important, they appreciated that food is fun: When the eggnog planned for a judges' feast on Monday night didn't materialize until Tuesday morning, they renamed it "bleached tomato juice" and poured it for breakfast.

Yet they were also guilty of the foibles that still trip up well-meaning members of the food media. They exhibited enormous hubris. They were blinded by sentimentality. They were mildly elitist and remarkably egotistical. If members of the all-white judging panel were bothered by the framework of a contest in the Jim Crow South, they didn't publicly mention it.

Virginia had held this tournament once before. But the debut was kind of a dud. Instead of celebrating the state's unique foods, that first contest emphasized generic items from the repertoire of any competent hotel cook. Head judge George Frederick, president of the Gourmet Society of New York, admonished the organizing committee that "the whole United States feels sort of let down."

Still, the driving force for the second edition of the tournament wasn't Americans' gloom. It was Virginians' outrage.

Ted Shane was the son of an immigrant tailor from Hungary. Born in New York City in 1900, he graduated from Columbia University in 1923. He started working for magazines, and became a popular profile writer, crossword puzzle constructor, and joke editor.

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Ted Shane was also a troll. His stories for *Collier's* included pieces like "Women Can't Cook." But the essay that got Shane in real trouble was his 1947 piece, "I Hate Southern Cooking."

The gist was that Southern food is "starchy, monotonous, porcine, heavy and overdone." Shane was especially disgusted by grits during his trip through the South, describing them as "pure white gunk" and "lumpy, greasy, and as delicious as a dish of boiled Daytona Beach sand."

Shane conceded it was possible to get a good meal in Charleston or New Orleans. But in those cities, he wrote, the best food wasn't cooked by Southern cooks or made according to Southern recipes. Elsewhere in the region, bland cornbread, overcooked vegetables, and greasy fried chicken were common denominators in restaurant and home kitchens.

Reprinted in the *Negro Digest*, Shane's essay provoked a torrent of rebuttals, including one published in *Liberty Magazine*, which had run the original piece. Harold Smith chided Shane for neglecting Georgia peaches, rice with gravy, and ambrosia. What galled him was Shane's stance on grits.

He wrote, "Any mashed-potato eater who could stoop so low to malign grits could never find true expression in the Valhalla of cooking—the South! You must

be shown!"

Showing off Southern cuisine is just what the folks responsible for the second annual Virginia Chefs' Tournament had in mind: They invited Shane to judge their event, and he accepted.

If we think about food writers in terms of types, we know which role Shane played. He was the provocateur; the one who strides into herds of sacred cows with an AK-47. These days, you find his like on social media: There's no doubt that "I Hate Southern Cooking" would today be classified as *Thrillist* clickbait.

Shane wasn't alone on the panel. Fifteen fellow judges joined him. More than half of them were food journalists. They were chosen for their fame. Each represented a different aspect of their craft, as well as the potential and pitfalls associated with it.

Shane was a storyteller. The only judge considered even more of a "get" for the Virginia contingent was a stats guy.

Duncan Hines is sometimes described as a spiritual predecessor to Craig Claiborne, the *New York Times* critic who is credited with making restaurant reviews lively, broad, and relevant. In fact, he doesn't belong on that branch of the food writing tree. He was a stickler and a list-maker: His genetic material skipped over all of the Reagan-era critics we now read reverentially and reappeared in Yelpers. That is to say: It wasn't uncommon for Hines to embark on a write-up by entering a

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restaurant through its kitchen door, so he could verify whether its dishwasher and garbage disposal were working.

A Kentucky native, Hines didn't share Shane's distaste for Southern food. For example, he endorsed Mary Beard's tearoom, located on North 20th Street in Birmingham. In his classic book, *Adventures in Good Eating*, he wrote, "Try the chicken hash with corn cakes. Fried chicken and pecan pie."

And that's about all he had to say about that. Hines wasn't opposed to Southern food, but he feared food as much as he craved it. As he wrote in the first line of the introduction of his book, "My interest in wayside inns is not the expression of a gourmand's appetite for fine foods." Instead, he warned, "You may enjoy a delicious tasting meal and yet suffer the aftermath of violent gastrointestinal disturbances."

Hines' prose wasn't lofty: He was as apt to write about light fixtures and strong coffee as "clear green turtle au sherry" and "ring sealed steaks." For food-fixated folks, his descriptions are sometimes exasperating.

Still, it's hard to fault Hines' reportorial instincts. Plus, his ethical standards were unparalleled: At a time when the line between advertising and editorial was still porous in places, he refused to sell ads in his guide. Even if he wasn't swayed by the romance of magnificent meals, he no doubt inspired other people to look for them.

Outside of food writing circles, Duncan Hines today exists in most people's minds as a brand; he sold his name a few years before he died. It's still being stamped on cake mix boxes and frosting cans. Before Hines made his debut on boxes, another one of the Virginia Chefs' Tournament judges was already being recognized as an icon.

According to local press coverage of the event, Betty Crocker was one of the judges. Of course, there is no such person as Betty Crocker. But there was Marjorie Husted, the Minnesota advertising executive who, in 1921, developed the consummate homemaker persona.

A few months after issuing her rulings in Virginia, Husted addressed a gathering of the nation's food editors. "We have been urging women to come out of the kitchen," she said, "until we may have convinced them it was a poor place to be."

If you talked to worried male executives in the 1950s, that was the rap on food editors. The men were terrified that nobody would buy their dish soap, allspice, and oats if women stampeded into the workplace (where, horrors of horrors, they might come after men's jobs.) Those advertising executives wanted newspapers to publish food columns packed with challenging recipes to keep housewives in the kitchen. They weren't keen on shortcuts and time-saving strategies endorsed by female editors of what most newspapers then called the women's pages.

American newspapers have always covered food in some fashion: It would have been hard to write about the Revolutionary War without referencing tea, sugar, and the appetites for them. Women's pages, more specifically debuted in the 1890s. They proved central to the story of food writing in the twentieth century. Publishers thought they could lure more advertisers of female tonics, fabric, and feather boas if they had a section of the paper designated for women to read.

They were right. Within half a century, the Thanksgiving food section of the *L.A. Times* ran ninety pages long. Think about that for a second. I work in Charleston, one of the most vibrant food cities in the South. During particularly newsy weeks, we have tense discussions about the possibility of expanding the section from four to six pages.

The women who headed up these sections were, in some ways, incredibly powerful. Yet in significant ways, these women didn't have power at all. In some newsrooms, they were relegated to tiny offices on a different floor because they weren't supposed to be exposed to cigar smoke or curse words. Their jobs were so tenuous and demanding that they rarely

asked for time off: A food editor in Atlanta in the 1950s got married on her lunch break. Many of them never married.

Despite their sacrifices, the food editors weren't celebrated as they neared retirement in the 1970s. Younger feminists believed the editors had promoted home cooking over careers. They rejected these women as detrimental to the struggle. After years of being treated badly by men, these food editors had to deal with being treated badly by women.

If only the young women had listened to Betty Crocker. She was right in this case: Many of the food editors made a point of not glamorizing the kitchen, instead depicting it as a site of drudgery. They encouraged culinary exploration and experimentation, but not at the cost of time, money, or mental energy their readers couldn't afford to spend.

There were five current or future food editors on the judging panel for the Virginia Chefs' Tournament. Elinor Lee, soon-to-be food editor of the *Washington Post,* is worth attention.

In the 1950s, home cooks depended on newspaper food editors to explain not just foreign cuisines new to their neighborhoods, but products new to their supermarkets. In 1955, one food editor estimated that one-third of the edible items her readers purchased didn't exist a decade earlier. In 1957, Lee won an award for a series of articles tracing how peaches, turkeys, and tomatoes were grown, processed, and distributed. This was fifty years before anybody used the expression "farm-to-table."

Education was at the core of Lee's columns. She also devoted countless inches to putting women at ease. For instance, one of her earliest columns was a grocery shopper poll; in 1956, she wanted to know whether shoppers used mixes or cooked from scratch.

Every woman proudly claimed mixes. Nowadays, we tend to rue the advent of mass-produced food, and fret that people don't know how to make scratch biscuits. But for most of American history, people didn't make biscuits. Women made biscuits. And Lee and her contemporaries were instrumental in letting them know that it was OK to trade that chore for work outside the home, if they chose. "I used to think I had to do it the hard way," one woman told Lee. "Now I use all kind of mixes."

Only one shopper spoke up for scratch cooking. Robert Basford told Lee that he wouldn't stand for mixes in his wife's kitchen. In response to a follow-up question, he continued, "Do I help with the cooking? Mercy, no! That's my wife's job." Even in 1956, he came across as a jerk.

Gender issues weren't the only topics broached by female food editors. Because male editors of the paper generally didn't read the food pages, food editors had leeway to discuss subjects that the editorial board might sidestep. Lee's columns often touched on how meager transportation was undermining nutrition. Other food editors returned to topics including child care and food stamps.

Yet these editors were not just a serious bunch. When friends remember them, one of the first things they invariably mention is a signature drink. Charlotte Walker, the food editor at the paper in Charleston, was partial to Scotch with ginger ale.

Bernice Burns, food editor of *Redbook*, was another judge at the Virginia event. When she died in 2014 at the age of 102, a colleague said, "I met her in the jungles of Peru in 1966 at a Shipibo Indian Village near Pucalpa. She arrived in a dugout canoe while I was filming the making of local beer by village women. She liked adventure."

But which chef's Sally Lunn bread did she like best? That's what the Virginia contest of 1948 was supposed to reveal.

The event had an inauspicious start: At the opening session, the Virginia apples set aside for juicing had been inadvertently locked up. So the day started with Florida orange juice. Breakfast featured roe herring and batter bread, which initially confounded the judges. As the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* reported, "Three had to be briefed in the art of... how to tell the roe from the meat."

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Lunch featured clams on the half shell, Brunswick stew, buttermilk biscuits, corn sticks, watercress-and-tomato salad, and ice cream with Virginia raspberries and gingerbread. The writers on the panel weren't sure what to do with the cornsticks. Troubled by the amount of sugar and flour included, one said to another: "It's good. But is it really Virginian?"

Hines and Shane didn't care about authenticity. But over Brunswick stew, they traded theories over the declining quality of venison. Hines blamed rushed processing; Shane thought too many hunters were bad shots who hit deer in the pancreas.

Once the luncheon menu was publicized, *The New York Times*' editorial board agonized about authenticity, too. Whether the food was delicious or genuinely Virginian was immaterial, they argued. They doubted whether a sumptuous banquet was appropriate when most Americans were subsisting on soda pop, and chicken salad sandwiches: "There are those who are willing to risk a little of this decadence, if only it would filter down from places like Fredericksburg to those places at which most

of us perforce must eat." The plate was political long before Americans were thinking about GMOs and sweetened beverage taxes.

Dinner in Fredericksburg included crab flake cocktail, green tomato pickles, baked ham with wine sauce, candied yams, corn pone, black-eyed peas, and pippin salad. Actually, that was the first dinner: Another dinner was served at 11 p.m., featuring smoked turkey, fried chicken, corn pudding, and spoon bread. It's not clear whether the *New York Times* reporter was on hand to cover that snack.

The judges declared Woodrow Lee's fried chicken to be best of the bunch. The head chef at the Beverly Hotel in Staunton, Lee had learned how to cook from his grandmother, Ida Lee, the head cook at Mary Baldwin College. Ida Lee had died about a year before the contest. She wasn't around when her grandson received a letter from the Childs Company, one of the country's first restaurant chains.

In the 1880s, when New Yorkers were despairing over swill milk and Typhoid Mary, Samuel and William Childs opened a restaurant clad in white marble. It looked clean, and the prices were reasonable. By the 1920s, there were more than 120 Childs locations. In 1925, William Childs made a disastrous business decision: Inspired by his concern for customers' health, he removed all meat products from the Childs menu. The company was still in a tailspin by the late 1940s, when Childs wrote to Woodrow Lee for his recipe. That is all to say: the saga that began when a New York humorist poked fun at Southern cooking ended when the Childs Company began serving Virginia-style fried chicken in Brooklyn.

Even though Southern food was making inroads up North, Shane wouldn't give his hosts the satisfaction of shifting his culinary allegiances. As the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* put it, "he didn't exactly break out a Confederate flag and sing Dixie." But the fastidious George Frederick was moved by a watermelon pickle.

At the close of the event, a reporter caught up with him over dessert. He wrote, "Frederick fingered a bit of moist fruitcake and added reflectively, 'It is a highly commendable enterprise to hold these tournaments. So many states are content with bragging about themselves rather than improving." The reporter politely refrained from pointing out that the event wasn't entirely Virginia's doing. It was jump-started by a food writer, judged by food writers, and covered by food writers, who gently nudged American food forward.

Hanna Raskin is food editor of The Post and Courier *in Charleston, SC. She writes about the past so frequently that while reporting this story, she taught a librarian how to use microfilm. She delivered a version of this piece at the 2016 Food Media South conference.*

REBEL RECIPE

A POTLUCK DINNER LESSON

by Erika Council

"You can make the potato salad. I bet you make that really well." At least that's what I think the woman said, while handing me a sign-up sheet for our neighborhood potluck dinner. Surely she did not just say that. I looked around the room. I was the only black person. She assumed because I am black, I could cook anything. Including potato salad.

I ignored her, hoping she would recognize her error. Instead, she tried again." We're hoping you would make potato salad for the dinner," she said. "That's like, a soul food specialty, right?" She leaned in closer, whispering, "soul food," as if saying it out loud might cause her to lose standing with Jesus.

At this point, three other women joined the conversation and waited for my response. Mentally counting to 600, I tried to temper my patience. This didn't work.

"Soul food?" I repeated, making a grand gesture of looking over my shoulder as I whispered the word. "You know, I've never made potato salad. Is that like tuna salad?" This was, of course, a lie, but I said it with a straight face. The four women looked at me in disbelief.

Erika Council

ROASTED POTATO SALAD

For a vegetarian spin, toast the potatoes in olive oil or grapeseed oil and skip the pancetta. Serves 6.

INGREDIENTS

- 1 Tbsp. olive oil
- 1 cup pancetta, diced
- 12 fingerling potatoes, halved (any white potato on hand will do)
- Kosher salt to taste
- ½ cup of mayo, such as Duke's
- 1 Tbsp. yellow mustard
- 1 Tbsp. freshly squeezed lemon juice
- 2 Tbsp. fresh chives, minced
- 1 tsp. freshly ground black pepper
- 2 cups arugula leaves

DIRECTIONS

Preheat oven to 400 degrees.

Heat a large cast iron skillet to medium high. Add the olive oil and pancetta and cook until crispy, about 10 minutes.

Using a slotted spoon, remove the pancetta and drain on a paper towel-lined plate. In the same skillet, add the potatoes and cook in the fat for about 10 minutes or until they turn slightly golden.

Place the skillet in the oven and roast the potatoes for about 15 minutes, or until they are golden brown and tender on the inside.

While the potatoes are roasting, whisk together the mayo, mustard, lemon juice, chives, and pepper in a large bowl. When the potatoes are finished, fold them into the mayo mixture. Toss in the arugula and pancetta. Serve while warm.

Among this group, it seemed a preconceived notion that potato salad is a soul food specialty and that I, the only black person in the room, should be the resident expert. I promised to see what I could do.

What was their idea of potato salad? Does it have fried chicken crumbles or collard greens mixed in? (On second thought, that sounds like something I should try.) In my family, potato salad was always a Sunday supper staple. The ingredients were straightforward: mayo, mustard, potatoes, eggs, celery, and tangy pickle relish.

My friend's German grandmother made great potato salad. She had soul. Maybe I should have asked if she was available to cook for the dinner. Instead, I kept my promise. I created potato salad that looked and tasted nothing like what they expected. To fingerling potatoes roasted in pork drippings, I added chives and lemon juice. I tossed everything with mayo. Since this was supposed to be a salad, I threw in arugula. I held off on the fried chicken crumbles and collards.

On the day of the community dinner, I placed my large bowl on the table. The dish received a few odd looks before people dug in. Soon after, folks went back for seconds. They whispered about how the dish was strange, but delicious. Today, three years since launching my Sunday supper series, that potato salad has become one of my most requested dishes. When I'm asked how it came to be, I laugh and say, "Well, let me tell you a story."

Erika Council is the Atlanta-based writer and photographer behind the award-winning blog, Southern Soufflé. *Her Sunday supper club features soulful renditions of classic Southern cuisine.*

GRAVY

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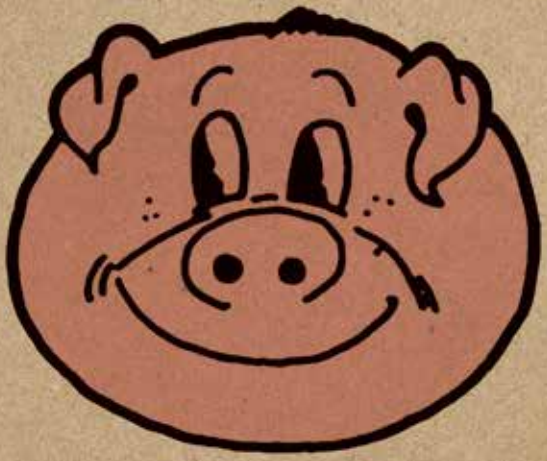

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