

Gravy



WINTER
'11

A FOOD LETTER
FROM THE SOUTHERN FOODWAYS ALLIANCE

ISSUE
NUMBER
**THIRTY-
NINE**



PUBLICATION OF GRAVY IS UNDERWRITTEN BY MOUNTAIN VALLEY SPRING WATER

Gravy

ABOUT GRAVY

A publication of the Southern Foodways Alliance, a member-supported institute of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi. Visit www.southernfoodways.org.

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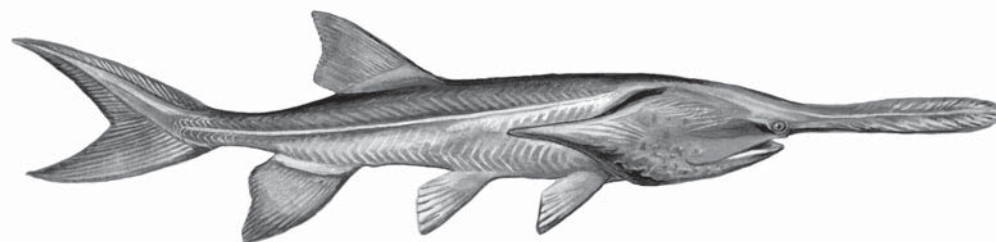
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BELUGA, OSSETRA, AND— PADDLEFISH?

Harvesting caviar in the Arkansas Delta

by Joe York



GROWING UP IN ALABAMA with my steel-worker dad and my high-school-teacher mom, we didn't eat that much caviar—and by "that much," I mean "any." Caviar just wasn't for us. It was for action-movie villains who shoveled it into their big, evil mouths and then shot people dispassionately for trivialities like forgetting to feed the cat or not liking caviar.

But not long ago, I heard that folks from Arkansas were working the Mississippi River to harvest sacs of roe from a peculiar fish that looks like a small dolphin sans blowhole with a canoe oar for a nose. I thought I'd better give caviar a chance.

Lee Ross is one of those folks. He runs a catfish joint in De Witt, Arkansas, but between November and March he also deals in caviar. On cold winter mornings when reasonable folks are settling into their third cup of coffee and thinking about calling in sick, Lee and his sidekick, Billy Ray Manues (who Lee says looks exactly like the Red Baron as portrayed on a box of Red Baron-brand frozen pizza), are already howling down the river in search of these fish with black gold in their bellies. One morning, I went along for the ride.



BILLY RAY WORKS A CIGARETTE with one hand and the Evinrude sixty-horsepower outboard motor with the other. The motor spits a rooster tail into the river and the river spits back as we break through the light chop. It's cold. Very cold.

Lee reclines across the bench in the front of the boat and takes a call on his cell phone. The river races by while he calmly arranges to ship several pounds of caviar to a customer in Los Angeles. "We send some to New York," he tells me when he's off the phone. "But most of our stuff ends up out in L.A. for the movie stars."

Billy Ray eases off the throttle and we slide near the bank, toward a row of plastic jugs bobbing in the mad current. Reaching from the bow of the metal boat, Lee lifts a jug and the leaded line of the net comes with it. The net is a grab bag of twigs, Styrofoam cups, and a few small catfish. We move on to another net, and then another. Finally, we hit pay dirt.

Lee pulls the net out of the current, and for the first time I get a look at a paddlefish (or spoonbill, as they're also known). It comes up backwards, revealing first its long, flat tail fin, and then its thick, muscular midsection. The eyes emerge, and then, just as I think there couldn't be any more fish to this fish, the wild, prehistoric-looking bill keeps coming and coming out of the water like a handkerchief pulled from a magician's palm. The entire fish is six-and-a-half or seven feet long.

"Egger!" hollers Lee as he hauls the giant fish into the boat.

"Egger?" I ask.

"Yeah man, this sucker is loaded with eggs," says Lee, grinning.

"How can you tell?"

"You can just tell. If you look at the sides of them, you can see where they're fat through the middle. That's where the eggs are."

Lee reaches into the bottom of the boat and comes up with a knife. He opens the fish's belly. On either side of the backbone, like two big lungs full of poppy seeds, are the egg sacs. Lee cuts carefully along the edge of one sac.

"The biggest fish ever I brought in had thirteen pounds of eggs in

it," says Lee, holding his latest prize. "This one here is a monster, and it's probably got about nine or ten pounds of eggs in it. We get about ninety to a hundred dollars a pound for the eggs once they're processed. We process them ourselves, freeze them, and ship them out to L.A. It ain't easy at all, but you can make a living at it." Lee turns back to his thousand-dollar fish and removes the other sac. He rinses it in the Mississippi before bagging it up and placing it in an ice-filled treasure chest.

Over the next few hours, we pull in a couple more eggers. By the time we realize we're hungry, we've got about sixteen pounds of eggs in the boat.

Billy Ray pilots the boat toward the Arkansas bank and we pull up alongside another pair of fisherman who've been out working their nets for paddlefish. The men in the other boat eat crackers and Snickers. Lee reaches into a bag and pulls out a can of Vienna sausages. He cracks open the can and pours the sausage juice into the river, then expertly removes the first sausage.

"Do y'all ever eat caviar out here?" I ask as Billy Ray pops a sausage into his mouth.

"I don't want that crap in my mouth," he replies between bites.

I ask Lee the same question.

"I eat it up there when we process it, but I don't really know how to eat it," he says, digging out another Vienna. "People have told me they eat it with toast and butter and smear it on there, or on them little pancake things. I like it all right, but it just ain't something I want to eat." 🍷

Joe York works at the University of Mississippi's Media & Documentary Projects Center. He has made over twenty-five short films with the Southern Foodways Alliance and is currently at work on the feature documentary Southern Food: The Movie. Photographs by Joe York. Paddlefish art courtesy clipartof.com.



How to Get to Heaven Without Dying

Finger-picking and fellowship at Chattanooga's Bluegrass Grill

by Dana Shavin

IT'S FITTING THAT, ON THE DAY IN 2007 when Bluegrass Grill opened on Main Street in Chattanooga, Tennessee, Alison Krauss music played from a jukebox in the corner. *Everybody wants to go to heaven, but nobody wants to die*, she sang. It is a well-loved lyric from the bluegrass world, one that Father Jonas Worsham, an ordained priest and the owner (with wife Joan Marie) of Bluegrass Grill, has incorporated into his sermons.

But if there *were* a way to get to heaven without dying, it might involve mushroom hash, a spanakopita omelet, a smoked-salmon frittata with herbed cream cheese, or any number of other breakfast and lunch selections at Bluegrass Grill, a small but high-energy eatery at the heart of the newly revitalized Southside neighborhood. Southside

is home to a variety of restaurants, art galleries, artists' studios, boutiques, and a bakery. There are remnants of the old neighborhood still visible here—abandoned buildings and weedy patches of unused land—but these are slowly vanishing in the wake of a socially conscious gentrification effort led by civic-minded Chattanoogaans, including the Worshams.

The Worshams have been in the restaurant business for thirty years. Early on, they were members of a Christian Brotherhood organization that opened Raphael Houses, emergency shelters that operated soup kitchens—and later, day cares—in high-crime areas. They went wherever the need was highest, ladling soup in cities as far-flung as Indianapolis, Boston, and San Francisco. It was this immensely satisfying ministry work that helped inform their decision to open their first restaurant in Memphis, in a formerly condemned building they renovated for \$10,000 with the assistance of their parish.

By then, Father Jonas—who learned how to cook while working at a Greek restaurant in Cleveland, Ohio—was an experienced cook. The Memphis restaurant was “wildly successful,” according to Joan Marie, drawing in not just nearby Memphis State students but residents from the neighboring communities as well. A family business—and lifestyle—was born. “Every Saturday for years, our kids worked in the restaurant with us,” Joan Marie says.

“They realized they had to work through the sibling and family stuff in order to work together effectively. And they did.”

Father Jonas is sixty-one. His wife calls him “Pappa,” apropos of his long beard, round girth, and pensive eyes. Joan Marie, fifty-two, is built like a teenager, with a single waist-length braid, tinted glasses, and an easy, engaging smile. “Pappa and I believe in building community,” she explains. “Once you’ve been in a few times, I know who you are, what you eat, and enough about your life to support



you in whatever's going on. Our mission is fresh, local produce—conscious food—served with awareness and love. Our food is eclectic and cross-generational. We can feed a vegan teenager as easily as we can feed her grandmother.”

“I took my son to the IHOP, and they brought out pancakes with canned fruit on top. It broke his heart.”



The logo on the menu—a banjo and a frying pan forming an x with the Orthodox cross centered between them—speaks volumes. The Worshams’ focus is on food, bluegrass music (which Father Jonas likes because it is “ninety-nine percent positive and uplifting”), and faith.

The Worshams bake all their own bread, including gigantic wheat-blend biscuits and a five-grain Scottish Struan bread. You can even get a blintz with sour cream, a nod to Joan Marie’s Jewish upbringing. Because of their emphasis on fresh produce and homemade fare, Father Jonas says it’s easy to be disappointed by other restaurants. “I took my son to the IHOP, and they brought out pancakes with canned fruit on top. It broke his heart.”

Life for the Worshams, inside and outside the restaurant business, is busy and fulfilling. In addition to doing the payroll and bookkeeping for Bluegrass Grill, Joan Marie works as a renal nurse at a local hospital. When asked how she has time for her twelve-year-old son and sixteen-year-old daughter still at home, the restaurant, her RN job, and her two other grown sons, whom she sees regularly, Joan Marie says simply, “Time opens up.”

And if that isn’t a bluegrass lyric, it probably should be. 🍷

Dana Shavin is a visual artist and lifestyle columnist for the Chattanooga Times Free Press; her essays have appeared in The Oxford American magazine. Photographs by Dana Shavin.

A GOOD MEAL AND A STORY TO TELL

Cultural sustainability on Virginia’s Eastern Shore



Oystermen on the Eastern Shore of Virginia, ca. 1975. Photograph courtesy of Bernie Herman.

Bernie Herman recently spoke with Gravy editor Sara Camp Arnold about his work with the Eastern Shore of Virginia Foodways Project.

THE EASTERN SHORE is a long, narrow peninsula composed of two counties, Northampton and Accomack, connected to Maryland by land and to the rest of Virginia only by the fourteen-mile-long Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel. It has gone over time from being one of the wealthiest rural counties in the United States to being one of the two in the state of Virginia with the longest history of sustained poverty.

The Eastern Shore of Virginia Foodways Project began in 2008 as a way to address a kind of economic development that spoke to the strengths and the history of this area known not just for the quality of its seafood—its fishery, oysters, clams—but also for the tilled crops, in particular sweet potatoes, tomatoes, all the produce associated with truck farming, much of which had really become diminished over time, particularly in the very late twentieth and early twenty-first century.

The project is based on the notion of heritage-based economic development and the recognition that, at the end of the day, folks really want only a few things, among which are a good meal and a story to tell.

One of the key things when it comes to the cultivation of clams and oysters is that Virginia's Eastern Shore is one of the very few areas that controls its own watershed. The other thing is the diversity of habitat—it's really remarkable. There's open Atlantic water, there are Atlantic marshes that run seven and eight miles deep to the shore proper, then on the Chesapeake Bay side there are all of those creeks that cut way in; there are places where the distance from tide to tide—from Atlantic side to Bay side—is less than a mile and a half, two miles maybe. So in some ways it's almost an island down that far.

With all of those different kinds of marine environments, you get a real diversity of seafood. You also get a real diversity in foods that are dependent on location for taste.

A LOT OF THE FARMING of shellfish is geared toward larger-scale sales. But what I'm thinking is that there is a real possibility for small, name-specific oysters, like Nassawadox Salts or Westerhouse Specials, that come out of this community. The oysters are also one of those things where you just go, "there really is a terroir here—and you can taste

it!" And an oyster tastes *exactly* like where it comes from. I mean, if it comes from clean water, you can taste the clean water. If it comes from a high-salinity environment, you can taste that. If it comes from an area where all the seawater is filtered through marsh grasses, you can taste that. So you can taste oysters from this area, and you will get five distinct tastes from a seven- to ten-mile radius. There are not many places in the United States where that occurs.

My neighbor and I can tell the difference between each other's oysters, and he grows his about a mile north of mine. Last winter, four folks came over to my house on the Eastern Shore, each with his own oysters, and we had a five-oyster tasting. All of those oysters had grown up in much the same area, but they tasted very different. Again, it's about a kind of balance that reflects that terroir. Now, having said that, everybody's favorite oyster is the oyster that grows where he comes from.

WHEN PEOPLE TALK about sustainability, it usually proceeds from a consideration of economics: How do you make something actually work in a way that does not degrade the environment but creates a continuous and renewable enterprise? The missing part of most of those conversations is culture. And you can introduce almost anything you want into this area. But unless there's a kind of cultural buy-in, unless there's a way in which things make sense, the success of those enterprises is going to be severely limited. It makes a lot more sense to me to really work *with* a community and *for* a community as opposed to work *on* it.

What I'm interested in is working with the farmers and fishermen and with other folks to find value-added opportunities that might increase their market, increase awareness, increase demand. I think that by creating a kind of heritage awareness, particularly through the stories associated with the foodways, it might result in an increase in production, which would result in hopefully one job that might keep one more family from having to leave. 🍷



Carlo Silvestrini on the **HOG SLAUGHTER**

by Greg Alan Brownderville

Hog-killing day, wind face-chap cold.
Fever got me good, woozing up my thought.
I seeing triple, hunger-fangs take a hold.

Fire over water in a big black pot,
Papa slit hog throat, rope him round the head,
hang him from a gum tree, douse him right hot,

shave him cleany pink. Next part I dread.
Stab hog in the heart, let bright blood.
For blood pie sake, save a pail a red.

Rain, sleet, snow blows up, make shitty mud.
Stray mutt twitchy from the swamp, slobber beard,
coughing like a brimstone preacher mongst the crud.

One dog, see, make three to me. I get skeered.
Papa toss him hog gut slime. Sky's dark guts
ooze out, turn the light blue-weird.

Papa clean intestines and, checking for cuts,
blow them up a like balloons. Mash B-grade meat
for sausage links and the salt-skin gobbets

dry to cracklins. Tongue, lips, ears, and feet
pickled or ground to hogshead cheese.
Ain't too much here a man can't eat.

Annual February hog-killing demonstration at the Old South Farm Museum, Woodland, Georgia, 2008. Photograph by Angie Mosier.

Loin for *lonza*, quarters for *prosciutto*. Sugar, yeast,
meal, and raisin make cake out of boiled backbone.
Drop liver, heart, and kidney fresh in a grease,

sizzle with some pepper, salt, and onion.
Scramble brains with eggs and fry.
Cut fat and skin in bits, boil them in a cauldron

for the family lard—year supply.
Muddy man-shadows making rag soap, scald
waste fat and mix it up with lye.

Only hair, hoof, intestine goop, and teeth get culled.
No smokehouse, no stable,
so we move inside. Papa rub a thick coat a salt

in a fat slab. We store it on the cypress table
in my leaky room, where it smells
up my dreams. Dirty snow buries my Bible,

chills my bed. Through knotholes
in the floor of my head, I see a red-eye rabid dog
and I'm skeered every night when the black blanket falls,

I'll feed a snorting ghost ripped from a hog. 🍷

Greg Alan Brownderville, whose first collection of poems, entitled Gust, will be published in the fall of 2011 by Northwestern University Press, is a native of Pumpkin Bend, Arkansas, and a professor of English at Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Missouri.



PIMENTO CHEESE IN THE NORTH CAROLINA PIEDMONT

From home to work and back again

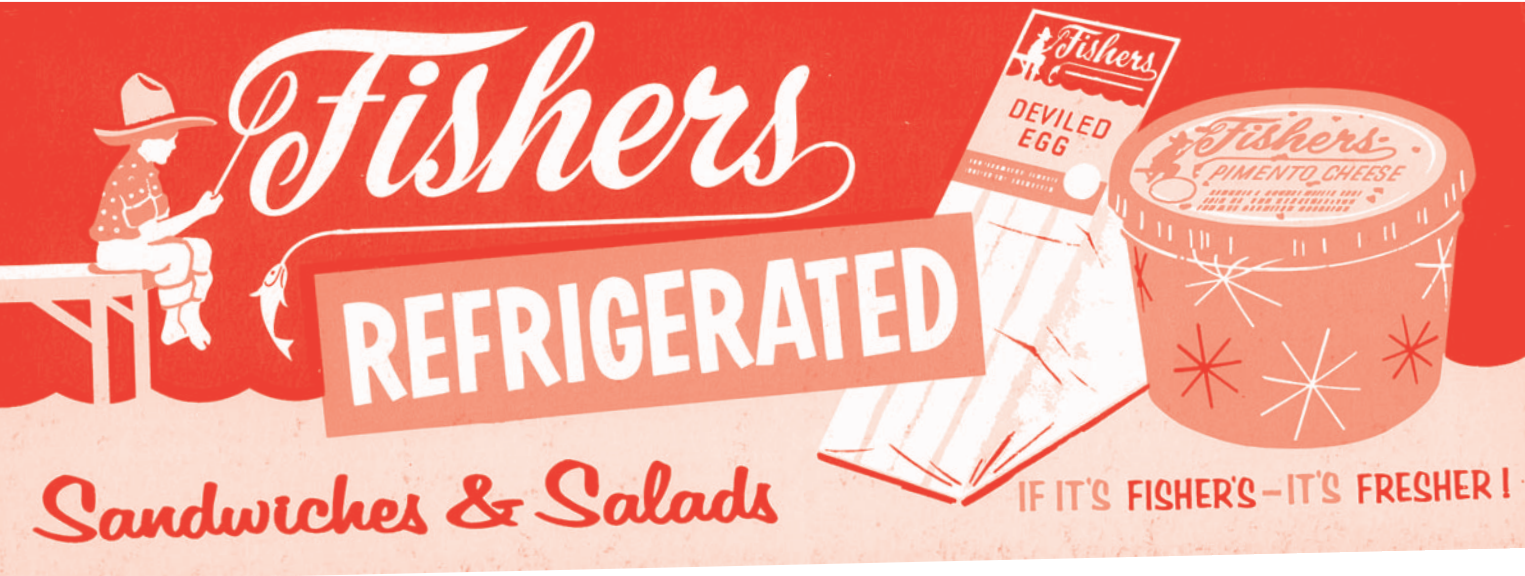
by Emily Wallace

IN EARLY NOVEMBER, my aunt sent an e-mail to my extended family with a plan for Thanksgiving. The standbys were there—my mother would bring pecan pie; my Aunt Judy, deviled eggs; and so on. But then came a new suggestion. My name appeared with pimento cheese.

A month before, I'd wrapped up my master's thesis in folklore on the subject, and what the holiday e-mail made clear was that my relatives were eager to taste the results. Though no definitive recipe for the spread appears in my work, I made a batch and presented it with a plate of crackers at our Thanksgiving dinner. My family cooed.

"So this is what you came up with? It's good," they told me. But in their eyes, what I'd brought to the table was, in fact, nothing new. I'm pretty sure that my cousins thought their mother's recipe superior to mine, and, as each of my relatives had mentioned or forwarded me an article about pimento cheese at some point, they knew that I was definitely not the first to pen something about the spread.

Almost every national newspaper or magazine, it seems, has made some mention of pimento cheese in the last year. And forget just slapping it on bread or crackers. More and more menus tack



the spread onto some other type of food—from burgers and ribeyes to fish, eggs, grits, and pizza. Pimento cheese is everywhere, falling on the side of overwrought and over-served. So what, my family wanted to know, did I have to say about it? To their surprise, it was something about them.

What began as a delicacy served throughout the country to the upper class in the early 1900s had become a favorite food of the working class.



My relatives have roots in Albemarle, North Carolina, a former mill town in the Piedmont where a day of rain carves out orange puddles almost as bright and goey as the famed store-bought cheese spreads that Reynolds Price has labeled “congealed insecticides.” But on the Wiscasset Mill Hill, an area of company-owned housing where my mother grew up, Ruth’s and Star’s, the type of pimento cheese that Mr. Price has deemed inedible, were a staple and sustainer.

“I can’t remember opening my grandmother’s refrigerator without seeing pimento cheese there,” my mother has told me of her

youth. But the way she tells it, my family never ate pimento cheese at home. Rather, she says, “The pimento cheese at that house always took me to work. You know, we never had sandwiches as meals at home. We always sat down at the table and you ate a hot meal, three meals a day. And so it was never there for a meal at home. It was there for work.” And work, for many in the Piedmont of North Carolina (including my mother for a while), meant a cotton mill. There, particularly after the 1920s, formalized meal breaks were replaced by dope carts—wagons that wheeled through mills selling the likes of sandwiches and “dopes” (colas)—and employees were encouraged to stretch out their work and eat as they found time.

By the 1950s, sandwiches found their way into mill commissaries and vending machines, and refrigerated spreads like pimento cheese, chicken salad, and egg salad secured a permanent and affordable place on the Southern grocery shelf. Of those, pimento cheese became the most iconic. What began as a delicacy served throughout the country to the upper class in the early 1900s became a favorite food of the working class. Its availability was fueled by a lower cost of processed cheese—a food popularized during WWI—and an abundance of pimento peppers, which thrived in Southern soil and could be economically processed in the region’s factories rather than imported from Spain.

Throughout the Southern Piedmont, companies sprouted up with pimento cheese as a flagship product. Among such entrepreneurs was George Bell, whose family began Star Food Products by securing contracts with Burlington Industries, once the world's largest producer of textiles. As Bell puts it, his company wasn't alone: "After WWII, there was a [start-up] in Greensboro, there was a company in Durham, there was a company in Louisburg, there was a company in Kinston, there was a company in Concord. Charlotte had a couple. Gastonia had one. Roanoke. Oh yeah, there were a bunch of them."

A number of these companies remain. While working on my thesis, I stopped at various relatives' houses before donning a hairnet and conducting an interview at a factory nearby. A visit with my cousin Leigh coincided with a trip to Ruth's Salads in Charlotte. On a trek up to my aunt and uncle's home in Johnson City, Tennessee, I met Ed Simerly, vice president of Moody Dunbar, the leading canner of pimentos in the nation.

"Can you believe that all of those pimentos are tied to Johnson City?" my aunt asked at Thanksgiving. But that wasn't half of it.

"Approximately eighty percent of pimento cheese spreads are sold in eleven Southeastern markets," Simerly told me, with Raleigh-Durham and Charlotte ranking as the two biggest pimento cheese-consuming locales. It's a staggering number, which reveals that, though a lot of the industries that first supported widespread production and consumption of pimento cheese have come and gone, the spread continues to prosper and find new relevance in the South and beyond.

It's a gussied-up topping. It's a staple sandwich. It's a catalyst for factory and restaurant jobs. P.C. even made possible a master's thesis. 🍷

Emily Wallace recently completed her MA in folklore at UNC-Chapel Hill and contributes regularly to Raleigh-Durham's Independent Weekly. Fishers images courtesy of Tom Fisher. Cleveland image courtesy of Emily Wallace.



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

www.southernfoodways.org

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PUBLICATION OF GRAVY is underwritten by Mountain Valley Spring Water.

Thank you

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SOUTHERN FOODWAYS ALLIANCE
Center for the Study of Southern Culture
P.O. Box 1848
University, MS 38677-1848

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