



Gravy

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

Number 14, Spring 2004

TWO SOUTHERN RESTAURANTS

Harold's BBQ: The White Man's Blues, Stew, & 'Cue

BY KRISTA REESE

If country music is the white man's blues, then Harold's Barbecue in Atlanta is its culinary expression. Harold's original location, which opened in 1947 in south Atlanta, comprises every element of the perfect country music song. As David Allen Coe says in "You Never Even Call Me By My Name," those include Mama, trucks, a train, prison, rain, and getting drunk. With the exception of the last, Harold's Barbecue is about all these things. The strongest drink you're likely to find here is iced tea, but it's so sweet it can perm your hair. Harold's has everything else – and it's not a bad place to nurse a hangover.

In an industrial section of town where heavy trucks pockmark the streets, you'll have to cross the railroad tracks to get there—no matter where you're coming from. Atlanta's federal penitentiary is so close, it nearly overshadows the little building with the crooked smokestack and barred windows. Harold's is best on cold, rainy days, because the best dish here, hands down, is the thick-as-the-Okefenokee stew. "But what about Mama?" you might ask. As if any true Southerner could leave her out: Who else could have produced the three generations that run the place, outlasting segregation, the Talmadge dynasty, and pay phones? Also: I can never visit Harold's without wanting to order a glass of buttermilk from the menu. With cornbread crumbled in it, it's always been my own mom's favorite dessert.

Today, Harold's serves as touchstone as much as restaurant, with as diverse a crowd as you're likely to find in Atlanta. It's a favorite of Atlanta University faculty and guvment workers, cops and truck drivers, grandparents and kids. Lots of folks come for the chopped pork, and you'll usually find Lee Hembree at a worn chopping block, working away at the smoked hams. Harold Hembree, Jr., son of the original owner and now in his 70s, is behind the cash register, and a sister, Kay, works there too.

Harold's uses an electric cooker, but finishes the pork and eye-of-round beef over hickory coals. You can request a bit of outside meat, or a mix, to get your fix of carbon. Sandwiches come on lightly toasted white bread with a Monarch dill pickle. Aficionados know to order them with the slightly sweet slaw on top. The sauce is

tomato-based and lightly vinegary. I like the barbecue here, but the ribs are anemic little things, tasty but skinny as a supermodel. Harold's Brunswick stew, on the other hand, is a thick, smoky symphony of pork, chicken, tomato and corn, perfect with the lace-edged cracklin' combread. That's right—you can still find cornbread with these little fat bombs of flavor, reminiscent of porky raisins.

The waitresses are lightning-fast in their sockless Keds, and really do say things like, "It's so good your tongue will slap your brain." Window unit air-conditioners wheeze away, oblivious to outside temperatures. The whole place bears the ochre stain of wood-smoke, and the decorations run to old *Saturday Evening Post* covers, corny cartoons, and religious homilies. "If you have time to pray," one says, "God has time to listen." The only thing different from a country music song is that a visit to Harold's always has a happy ending.

Harold's Barbecue, 171 McDonough Boulevard (at Lakewood), Atlanta; 404-627-9268. Open Monday through Saturday 10:30 AM to 7:30 PM



Vern's Place: Soul Food in Dallas

BY JEFF SIEGEL

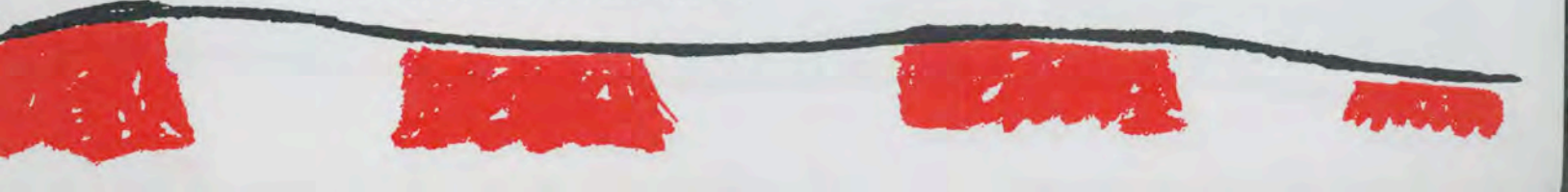
Dallas, despite its size and culinary reputation, is not much of a soul food town. The exception that makes up for that is in an old tire shop on the edge of downtown near one of the city's oldest African American neighborhoods.

Vern's Place is one of those restaurants every Southern city wants to have, but that not enough still do. It's authentic, it's down home, and it's as much a social and cultural experience as it is a place to eat. Vern's, for example, is one of the few truly integrated restaurants in town—black and white sharing communal tables covered with blue and white gingham or standing together in the cafeteria line. And Dallas's black middle class, even if they've left the old neighborhood, still drive back for lunch,

when the line is usually outside the door waiting to get in.

That's a testament to the food, which Suvern "Miss Vern" Freeman Simmons and her family have been serving for more than 35 years. Take your choice, be it the sweet tea (perhaps the only place in Dallas that still serves it), banana pudding, greens, chicken and dumplings or the trademark beef short ribs-cooked until they're stunningly tender and served in a gravy that's a meal in itself with a little white rice.

Vern's Place, 3600 Main St. at Exposition, Dallas; 214-823-0435. Open Monday through Friday 7 AM to 4 PM.



SFA FILM FINALIST FOR SLOW FOOD AWARD

Great News! The first Ruth Fertel Keeper of the Flame Award film, *Saving Seeds*, is a finalist in the Slow Food on Film Competition to be staged in Bra, Italy. The award will be presented during their April 21-25, 2004, conference. We're proud of filmmakers Joe York and Matt Bruder. And we're pulling for them to take home the coveted Golden Snail Award.

MEMBER NEWS/ RESEARCH REQUESTS

I am working on a book about the history of the Thanksgiving meal. I want to look at the ways that regional and ethnic traditions/recipes have shaped and continue to shape the holiday menu. For these chapters, I would very much like to include recipes and interviews/quoted information from "informants" from a variety of geographic areas/ethnic backgrounds who can talk with me about their particular individual Thanksgivings – very much a first person approach. I was hopeful that some of your members might be interested helping me out with this task. I am also seeking references (menus, recipes, descriptions) of 19th and early 20th Century Thanksgiving celebrations.

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GRAVY

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Jambalaya: Eating the Real Thing in the Jambalaya Capital of the World

BY JEFF SIEGEL

Finally, the truth, so no one will ever have to suffer through school-lunchroom-quality jambalaya ever again.

"If you put tomatoes in jambalaya, you'll ruin it," says Wally Tallion, and it's his job to know, for he is the president of the Jambalaya Festival Association in Gonzales, Louisiana, which will hold its 37th annual world championship cook-off over Memorial Day weekend. "Our good Louisiana rice won't cook properly if there are tomatoes in it."

Hence the brown jambalaya standard. The red kind (with tomatoes) might be okay 40 miles or so downriver in New Orleans, but not in Gonzales, where they take their jambalaya much more seriously. The emphasis is on rice and chicken—hen on the bone, insists Tallion—cooked outdoors in a cast iron pot over a wood fire.

This is quite different from cookbook jambalaya, which allows not only for tomatoes, but for sausage, seafood, and any variety of vegetables and seasonings. In this, the recipes reflect the dish's likely roots in the Spanish paella—the short-grain rice, seafood, and saffron dish that is common throughout the Iberian Peninsula.

In Gonzales, on the other hand, the championship cook-off mandates chicken and long-grain rice only (though there are other, nonchampionship events that allow pork and seafood products). In addition, each contestant has to stick to an 11-ingredient supplemental list that's so basic it's astounding, salt, pepper, white onions, cooking oil, hot sauce, and the like. No secret-formula mixes are allowed, and no red onions or parsley, either.

Each contestant's goal, says Tallion, is to let the chicken flavor permeate the entire dish. To that end, a typical pot will have 45 pounds of chicken, 15 pounds of rice, and

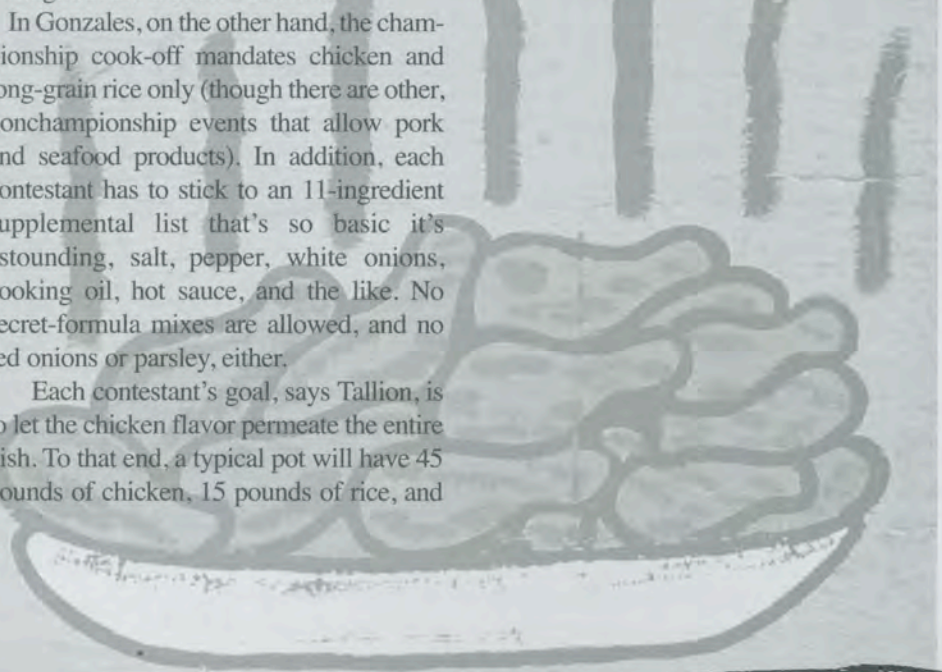
15 pounds of onions. Usually, but not always, contestants will brown the chicken, then add the onions and other seasonings (green bell pepper, celery, green onions, and garlic, in subservient proportion to the onions) to pick up the flavor of the chicken fat, and finally add rice and water. Then, depending on the heat of the fire, cook until the rice is tender. It's the variations in that process, he says, that separate the also-rans from the champions. Last year, 101 men and women competed, and 20 made the finals.

And Tallion offers one piece of advice to anyone, professionals included, who want to hope to make it to the finals:

"I look at the TV," he says, "and these are well known cooks, and they're throwing in yellow bell peppers and red bell peppers and green bell peppers. How are they going to taste the good chicken flavor with all those bell peppers in there?"

Or with tomatoes, either.

This year's Jambalaya Festival will be held May 28 through 30. For the schedule and further information, see www.jambalayafestival.org.



SPONBREAD AND STRAWBERRY WINE: RECIPES AND REMINISCENCES OF A FAMILY

By Norma Jean and Carole Darden.
Harlem Moon/Broadway Books \$18.95.

It is hard to believe that this groundbreaking modern classic is already 25 years old: it is still as fresh and lovely as it was when it first appeared, perhaps even lovelier, thanks to a new edition in celebration of its quarter century of success. Harlem Moon, a division of Broadway Books, has printed a handsome and affordable softcover book with a broad page format that is practical in the kitchen (it lies flat when you cook from it) and yet good looking enough for the coffee table. It is a great reason to get reacquainted with this timeless classic, and for acquainting a new generation with it, too.

—Damon Lee Fowler

New Soul Cooking

By Tanya Holland. Stewart, Tabori & Chang, \$30.

For Tanya Holland, chef and co-owner of Le Theater, a French restaurant in Berkeley, California and regular host of the Food Network *Melting Pot Soul Kitchen*, the term "soul food" refers to "the foods common in African-American communities that connect people to their shared roots." In addition to the foods of the American South, soul food incorporates influences from Africa, Brazil, and the Caribbean. Her interpretation of this cooking is influenced by her French training—cooking with seasonal and fresh ingredients—and her preference for a more health-conscious approach to traditional Southern foods.

Holland's recipes, illustrated by splendid photographs by Ellen Silverman, range from African recipes such as groundnut stew to new treatments of traditional soul food dishes—okra tempura and peppered gruyère baked grits and raspberry grit parfaits—that some might argue stretch the term "soul food" into meaninglessness. But many of the recipes are appealing and imaginative, and the book would have been even better with more careful editing. It's a collection that owes more to the sensibilities of a gifted cook than to any strict definitions imposed by ethnicity or geography.

—Thomas Head

HUNGER OVERCOME

By Andrew Warnes. University of Georgia Press, \$19.95.

African American writers have consistently drawn connections between hunger and illiteracy, argues Warnes, a lecturer in American history at Leeds University. They have also made connections between food and reading. Herein he explores the conflict and complement of malnutrition and abundance manifest in African American writing. Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, and Toni Morrison all figure in his work. Warnes believes hunger to be political. Interwoven with analysis of the previously mentioned writers, he references the slave autobiography *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Ntozake Shange's memoir *If I Can Cook / You Know God Can*, Horace Cayton and St. Clair Drakes' *Black Metropolis*, and Stanley Kramer's film *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?*

—Henry Mencken



Oral History Initiative Gets BIG boost from Jim 'N Nick's Bar-B-Q

Jim 'N Nick's Bar-B-Q of Birmingham, Alabama is the lead underwriter of the SFA oral history initiative. Nick Pihakis has pledged a total of \$75,000 over five years. The SFA will raise matching funds so that we can hire an oral historian. Among the initial duties we see such a person undertaking will be surveying existing

oral histories relating to food, and establishing an outreach program that identifies both interviewers and subjects. And, of course, we see that person in the field, doing interviews. Thanks Nick; thanks Jim 'N Nick's.

Fourth Southern Foodways Alliance Field Trip,

Alabama in Black and White Birmingham, Alabama, June 4-6, 2004

Join the Southern Foodways Alliance as we celebrate racial reconciliation through food. Gather with us in Birmingham, the crucible of the Civil Rights Movement, for a weekend of conversations and presentations and libations commemorating the 40th anniversary of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Feast on a Lazy Susan Supper of barbecue and biscuits and greens. Sip wines from South Africa, curated by the Palm Wine Society. Join us as we barrel through the Alabama countryside, bound for the Freedom Creek Blues Festival where Willie King and friends celebrate interracial bonds through down home blues and great home cooking. Return with Southerners of different hues and hometowns to Birmingham, as we embrace a city of renewed hope, no longer shackled by Jim Crow.

Look for a mailing to show up right about now. Or log on to www.southernfoodways.com for more details. Registration opened on March 5. Be sure to act fast, as spaces are limited.



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