



Gravy

[N]o other form of cultural expression, not even music, is as distinctively characteristic of the region as the spreading of a feast of native food and drink before a gathering of kin and friends.

-John Egerton, Southern Food

NUMBER 28, SPRING 2008

NEWS FROM THE SOUTHERN FOODWAYS ALLIANCE

Letter from the President: Southern Drinkways 101

Just when you thought you could easily define “Southern foodways” to your friends, the Southern Foodways Alliance offers another term for you—“Southern drinkways.” Because we are a hands-on kind of organization, you can experience Southern drinkways at our October 23-26, 2008, symposium in Oxford at the University of Mississippi, when we will explore the cultural history of liquid refreshments in the American South.

Our speakers will analyze how Southerners define themselves by what they drink. The drinks might be ice cold mountain water; iced tea, that iconic drink of the South (sweet, of course); buttermilk, with crumble-ins of cornbread; regional soft drinks; a Yadkin Valley, North Carolina, chardonnay; a craft-brewed beer, a lay-you-on-your backside cocktail from New Orleans; or soft sipping whiskey from Kentucky or Tennessee.

Because our Southern states now suffer from one of the worst droughts in the history of the region, drinkways is a very timely topic. Global warming makes us pause as we consider the impact of climate change on Southern drinks, from water to wine.

You will hear more about this exciting symposium in the months to come. Our summer SFA Field Trip to Louisville, Kentucky—“Blue Grass and Brown Whiskey”—is an important introduction to the world of Southern drinkways. To prepare for the symposium, I plan to inventory my personal experience with southern “drinkables.”

Here’s a start: cold skim milk with a piece of my mother’s chocolate cake—“really skim,” says my mother; a cherry coke from the Kream Kastle Drive-In, Blytheville, Arkansas; iced tea sweetened with local honey at my mother-in-law’s table in Vicksburg, Mississippi—extra lemon for Bill, please; Manischewitz Concord Grape wine at the annual Passover Seder; orange juice from frozen concentrate; my first cocktail in Overton Square in Memphis; and chicory coffee at Morning Call in New Orleans with puffs of powdered sugar everywhere.

I look forward to seeing you at SFA programs throughout the year, and I encourage you to ring in 2009 at the Taste of the South SFA Benefit at Blackberry Farm in Walland, Tennessee, January 8-11, 2009. Please join us for this wonderful weekend of amazing southern food, drink, hospitality, and SFA friends—new and old—all of whom are dedicated to supporting the important work of the SFA.

In friendship,
Marcie Cohen Ferris
UNC at Chapel Hill



SAVE THE DATE

JULY 11-13

Louisville: Blue Grass and Brown Whiskey, Eighth SFA Field Trip

AUGUST 22

Potlikker Film Festival Oxford

SEPTEMBER 10

Inaugural Viking Range Lecture, University of Mississippi, featuring Bicht Nguyen (*Stealing Buddha's Dinner*) and Monique Truong (*Book of Salt*)

OCTOBER 22-23

Delta Divertissement, Greenwood, Mississippi

OCTOBER 23-26

Eleventh Southern Foodways Symposium, Oxford, Mississippi

→ GRAVY ←

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BOOK NOTES

by Tom Head

New SFA Books

Read all about it. *Cornbread Nation 4: The Best of Southern Food Writing* is hot off the press. Edited by Dale Volberg Reed and John Shelton Reed, it's a must-read compendium of the smartest and most thought provoking writing about Southern Food.



In anticipation of the organization's tenth anniversary (in 2009), a small group of SFA writers and cooks has set about putting together a community cookbook of recipes culled from our esteemed membership and oral history subjects. We aim to celebrate grandmothers and artisans, farmers and bartenders, authors and chefs. We are still in the gathering-and-writing stages, but for a glimpse of the book's bright future, consider these pointed words, penned by our committee at the cookbook's conception:

"Think of an old spiral-bound cookbook of the sort that was popular before the Junior League thought it would make a mint on coffee-table style books. That's what we're aiming for."

The worker bees include Sara Roahen and John T Edge as wranglers and editors; Sheri Castle as recipe tester; and Tim Davis, April McGreger and Angie Mosier as recipe gatherers and writers—with help from Brooks Hamaker. The University of Georgia Press is our publisher. And our working title is *The Spiral Bound Bible of Southern Cooking: A Community Cookbook from the Southern Foodways Alliance*, though don't hold us to it.

Out of the Frying Pan: A Chef's Memoir of Hot Kitchens, Single Motherhood, and the Family Meal

By Gillian Clark, St. Martin's Press, 2007, \$23.95.



Gillian Clark, as she reminded us in her State of the Plate presentation on greens at the 2007 symposium, is not a Southern cook. Born on Long Island, New York, Clark received her culinary education at L'Academie de Cuisine in Maryland and worked in kitchens in D. C. and Virginia (including those of Ann Cashion and Susan Lindeborg) before opening her own restaurant, Colorado Kitchen, in the Brightwood area of D.C., in 2001. Because the restaurant was located in a developing area of the city, many people initially thought it must be a soul food carryout. The overlap of her "classic American" menu with the classics of Southern cooking—hot biscuits, cheese grits, fried chicken, pork in many glorious guises—might make the mistake understandable.

While Gillian's recipe for fried chicken (marinated in buttermilk, garlic, and Tabasco) is worth the purchase price, the focus of the book is not the 45 or so recipes it contains, but its story about two parallel struggles: the struggle of an aspiring chef to cook to her own standards in the face of resistance from profit-driven owners and alcohol-driven kitchen staff, and the struggle of a single mother to keep her family together and centered while faced with the necessity of making the money to support them.

Clark's prose is spare, direct, and without self-pity. The story she tells is a tale of our times, fascinating not only to those who run restaurants but those who enjoy eating in them. All of the restaurants we love are caught in the conflict between dedication to quality and the demand for profit. All of the chefs we respect must find their own ways of dealing with the inevitable tension between professional demands and family life. Gillian Clark never minimizes the difficulties, nor does she compromise her standards. "Cooking," she says, "is how I ultimately found myself." It's a pleasure to know that she has a second restaurant in the works.

Report from the SFA Board Fundraising and Chicken Fingers

In February of 2008, the SFA's Potlikker Film Festival landed in Birmingham. Like past festivals in Atlanta and Houston, the Birmingham event showcased SFA's documentary film projects for a broth- and beer-guzzling crowd. It also provided the SFA's Board with another meeting opportunity to advance its goal of eliminating chicken fingers—not to be confused with chicken-on-a-stick—from the face of the earth.

The board members in attendance —Bill Andrews, Scott Barton, Ann Cashion, Marcie Ferris, John Fleeer, Linton Hopkins, Angie Mosier, and Rathead (Mike) Riley—were held in line by SFA staffers John T Edge, Amy Evans, Mary Beth Lasseter, and Melissa Hall as they covered topics ranging from budgets and sponsorships to future programming, the SFA database, and Rathead's Mountain Empire, otherwise known as Bristol, Virginia.

SOME HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE MEETING:

MONEY MATTERS: Bill Andrews, newest member of the Board's left brain cabal, suggested we have a full year's expenses (400 grand) in savings. There was agreement that this would be swell. The next budget revision will reflect the goal.

In other number-crunching news: The SFA Endowment was at \$63,969.69 at the end of last year. SFA General Account: \$338,163.97. Campus "checking" account: \$104,795.

SPONSORSHIPS: John T and Melissa Hall have worked well together maintaining sponsorships. Work is underway to attract new sponsors in different ways, perhaps by inviting the most promising prospects to SFA events, and to upgrade the contributions of longtime sponsors whose gifts over time have been overshadowed by their exposure. In general, the best relationships tend to be with companies whose owners understand the SFA's mission.

BLACKBERRY FARM AND THE FELLOWSHIP: The Fellowship of Southern Farmers, Artisans and Chefs continues to evolve. Its signature event, "Taste of the South," is an annual SFA benefit at Blackberry Farm that doubles as a Fellowship gathering. New members are inducted at the dinner. This year's fundraiser, held earlier this year, was a success, but there was general agreement that it needs to be better publicized.

SCHOOL STUFF: SFA's ambition to expand food studies at Ole Miss has been well supported by interim director Ted Ownby. The SFA's Viking Range lecture series will invite a lecturer or two to campus each year. This September 10, Monique Truong (*Book of Salt*) and Bich Ngueyn (*Stealing Buddha's Dinner*) will speak.

THE JOHN EGERTON PRIZE: The prize is to be given annually to acknowledge a body of work, with the winner giving a campus presentation the next year. Honorees will be selected by a committee headed by Egerton. It is slated to begin January of 2009, and fundraising is going pretty well. More than 100 grand has been pledged.

SFA 3.0: We've contracted with a data base design firm to create a database which will allow us track all memberships, payments, donations, orders, talents, sponsor relations and event histories, among other things. It is pricey, but necessary, to bolster the organization's infrastructure. And look for a redesigned SFA web site in late summer, early fall.

UPCOMING EVENTS: Go to www.southernfoodways.com and click on "events." There are a lot of them, including a few where the SFA is consulting on content but not in charge. Look for *Cornbread Nation* dinners in Charleston, South Carolina, and Washington, D. C., to be added to the calendar soon. The 2008 Symposium will focus on Southern drinkways, a subject on which the SFA has a great deal of institutional expertise.

ONGOING PROJECTS: We are continuing to invest more in documentary work. Amy Evans and Sara Roahen have amassed an impressive body of oral histories. You can find much of it on the web site. Rien Fertel will work as an SFA intern this summer and spearhead the updating of our barbecue projects in Tennessee.

Southern Studies alumnus Georgeanna Milam is the newest member of the documentary team, which is expanding beyond the SFA umbrella. Also new is SFA Greenhouse, a new program that will provide financial support to independent documentary projects that are in keeping with our mission.

This summer will also see the SFA and the Center for Documentary Projects complete films on mutton and hotdogs, and catfish, as well as on Birmingham's Jones Valley Urban Farm. We're working on an "SFA To Go" boxed set of SFA films that can be shipped to festivals.

Finally, the SFA Cookbook is going to press this spring. Subject matter editors include Angie Mosier, Sheri Castle, April McGreger, and Tim Davis. Sara Roahen is doing double duty as general editor and task-master.

All in a weekend's work.

Yours in hunger,
The SFA Board

Inaugurating the Egerton Award

by Ashley Hall

Just over 20 years ago, John Egerton wrote a little book about Southern food. The subject might have seemed out of character for this author who had won a reputation writing on subjects such as civil rights and the dichotomies of Southern and American identities. But that unexpected book, called *Southern Food: At Home, On the Road, In History*, turned out to be a classic work inspiring both the preservation and progress of the Southern eating experience.

It's important to note that this book might never have been penned. John only pursued the idea after winning a grant that gave him the freedom to write about whatever he wanted. "I just about fell over," John said, "I never would have written a book on food if that hadn't happened."

So, who knows, if that money hadn't come his way, maybe he would not have found himself in Birmingham, Alabama, ten years later celebrating the founding of the Southern Foodways Alliance. In 1999, John and 40 or so others gathered at Highlands Bar and Grill to toast the birth of the SFA, an organization that honors the culinary tradition bearers of the American South.

On February 20, 2008, this tireless Inside Agitator returned to Highlands. This time he made the trek from Nashville to preside over a dinner, a new endowment named in his honor. The John Egerton Foodways Prize is an award that, beginning this fall, will be given annually by the SFA to a deserving scholar, activist, or artist who uses food to address questions of social or environmental justice. It's a way to champion those who, like John, want to call people to both the table and the barricade.

The size of the party in February had doubled since the first Highlands-SFA collaboration. Frank and Pardis Stitt generously opened their restaurant to a diverse crowd of food-lovers, each of whom wanted to celebrate the ideals of Egerton over plates of the food he had chronicled. Frank chose courses picked from *Southern Food*, itself. Diners sipped sazeracs and mint juleps in Highlands' welcoming bar and nibbled on crab puffs, oysters Bienville, and roasted pecans.

Later, the Highlands staff brought forth beef shoulder pot roast, mashed potatoes and rutabagas, stewed greens, and scalloped cabbage, the latter of which was both luscious and light as air.

It was difficult to forget that this was a night to celebrate, not just a cause and a man, but the power of words. Excerpts of John's writings were incorporated into the glowing centerpieces. And the evening's fellowship was further enriched by poetry from Alabama-native Jake Adam York, who read between courses from, among other works, his new book *A Murmuration of Starlings*.

The evening was a success all around. Not only did the guests leave glowing with culinary satisfaction, but the endowment achieved full funding. As John told the room of rosy-cheeked revelers, he hopes the award will further the notion of coming together over food, and that it will prop up "people who love Southern food enough to say, 'I will break bread with anybody.'"



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