

# AIN'T NOTHING LIKE THE REAL THING

I missed out on a lot in 2021, but I'm grateful  
for one gathering in particular.

BY SARA CAMP MILAM

A COUPLE OF WEEKS INTO THE COVID lockdown of spring 2020, I saw a social media post that read, "I'm a homebody, but DAMN...I liked going one or two places." Which, same. Some twenty-one months later, as I write this, I still struggle with a similar frustration. And if anything, I'm *more* eager to be out in the world, in the company of people who are not my dearly beloved immediate family.

I'm fully vaccinated and boosted, as is my husband, but our young children are not. (And actually, I'm counting the hours until my newly five-year-old daughter gets her first shot next week.) We've got a moderately mask-compliant preschooler and a mask-ripping toddler, which leaves us performing a tedious risk calculus in advance of most indoor activities. Are we willing to chance an hour at church, or a grocery-shopping trip, or dinner at restaurant for the possibility of illness or quarantine? This calculus is different for everyone, and depends on so many factors, not to mention privileges. But for us, most of the time, the answer is "no." We've balanced "no" with lots of valuable family time spent outdoors—and, as my husband reminded me the other day, we've lived in and utilized every square inch of

our home (and porch, and yard, and driveway) in ways we never anticipated. But we've also declined invitations we would have loved to accept. We've canceled plans to see extended family and out-of-town friends. We've stayed home instead of toasting our favorite bartender on his last night at Snackbar. (We miss you already, Ivy!)

I didn't expect to close out 2021 or ring in 2022 with yet another COVID-tinged editor's note. But I bring up the missed opportunities and the *wish we could join y'alls* to contrast them with one gathering that I am so very, very grateful *did* happen this year: the SFA Fall Symposium.

In hindsight, we could not have been luckier to have hosted this event—our twenty-fourth Fall Symposium, and our twenty-third in-person—how we did and when we did. We safely served a congregation of some two hundred fully vaccinated attendees, presenters, and chefs in what now feels like a vanishingly small window between the ebb of the Delta variant in Mississippi and the arrival of Omicron to the United States.

Counting the years that I volunteered for SFA before joining the staff as a full-time employee, this was my twelfth in-person Fall Symposium. If I'm honest, there were moments—lots of them—in



Derek Baker, beverage director at Snackbar in Oxford, serves lunch at the 2021 SFA Fall Symposium.

the weeks and months leading up to that October weekend when I wondered whether we should move ahead with our plans. I worried about someone getting sick. I worried about bringing the virus home to my children. On the other hand, I worried that my children could be exposed to COVID at school, and that the resulting quarantine would leave my colleagues short-staffed on the weekend every hand was needed.

Guess what? None of these scenarios happened. (And guess what else? This isn't the first time my worst-case fears have *not* come true.) What *did* happen was beautiful. Our guests were overjoyed to reconnect with old friends and meet new ones. They gave in, appreciatively and generously and unapologetically, to all of the feels that accompany Symposium weekend. They laughed with fellow diners over a lunch of fried catfish. They shared the fear and frustration of speakers who talked about land loss and climate change; and the hope of speakers who detailed their visions for a more inclusive, equitable future South. They toasted and applauded our annual award winners, oyster farmer Earnest McIntosh Sr. and chef-activist

Jai Williams

Bill Smith. And they marveled, as I did, at the beauty and grace and strength of Wideman Davis Dance, who performed my favorite Symposium arts commission to date.

The events of that October weekend seem barely possible just two months later: showing off my children at an outdoor breakfast, hugging *Gravy* writers and longtime SFA members who have become dear friends, dipping one of chef Ron Hsu's perfect potatoes fondant into a pot of béarnaise sauce in the service tent (and then doing it again, and again) after ferrying dinner plates to guests. As with any in-person experience, and as with so many events in the COVID era, I can't deliver exactly what we heard and felt and tasted. But I'm delighted to share with you, *Gravy* readers, a bit of the magic of that weekend in the pages that follow.

Our 2021 Symposium examined Southern environments—natural, built, and imagined. And for a fleeting thirty-six hours, it was its own environment. For that, I'm grateful. And I'm hopeful that 2022 will bring more moments of true connection. After all, there's nothing like the real thing. And I do like going one or two places. 🍷