

conservative Southerners. Democrats, citing his cuts to the social welfare network and hawkish foreign policy, saw Reagan as retrograde. Liberal Southerners thought Reagan and his Young Republicans like Ralph Reed of Georgia personified the boulders that blocked the road toward progress.

I didn't pay much attention to politics in 1982. In my third year of college, I was often oblivious to the changes that swirled around me. But I did spend a lot of time in bars. And I did listen to a lot of live music. Looking back, I recognize that my ear for my region began to shift that year, soon after R.E.M. released its first EP, *Chronic Town*. My understanding of the South began to shift then, too.

Unlike the white-boy blues narratives of the Allman Brothers and Wet Willie, the Macon, Georgia, bands I idolized when I was younger, R.E.M. crafted songs that were complicated and cryptic. They suggested that Athens, Georgia, where I went to college and where R.E.M. was born, was worthy of close attention and reinvention. They implied that the South was ready for the same. *Fables of the Reconstruction/ Reconstruction of the Fables*, which R.E.M. released in 1985, would confirm my hunch.

Rock was art, R.E.M. made clear, and art was worth paying attention to. About the time I started listening to them, I saw Jason and the Nashville Scorchers play an Athens double bill with the Psychedelic Furs. When Jason Ringenberg ripped apart the Hank Williams song "I Saw the Light" and leaped off stage into the audience, I heard the traditional South recast. Much later, as I began to think and write about food, I recognized that art might be something I could attempt, and change might be something

I could help drive.

I recently spoke with historian Grace Hale, whose forthcoming book, *Cool Town: Athens, Georgia, and the Promise of Alternative Culture in Reagan's America*, digs deep into why and how and to what effect my college town became a cultural incubator. She said that Athens in the 1970s and 80s defined itself as an oppositional force. She quoted the music journalist Greil Marcus, who, writing in that same era, said that bands can serve as images of communities. After I moved to Oxford in the 1990s and started writing and thinking about food, I realized that restaurants can serve comparable purposes. Put another way, we are more than *what* we eat. We are *where* we eat.

"I think that food in America can be all those things that we envy other cultures in being," Paul Prudhomme, the onetime Commander's Palace chef, who won international acclaim while working the stove of his restaurant K-Paul's, declared at that 1982 Symposium on American Cuisine. "Our restaurants have a huge task ahead... [We must] accept the responsibilities of who we are and what we are and carry on." Prudhomme was talking about cooking and about food. He was also arguing that food was a cultural totem and a social force.

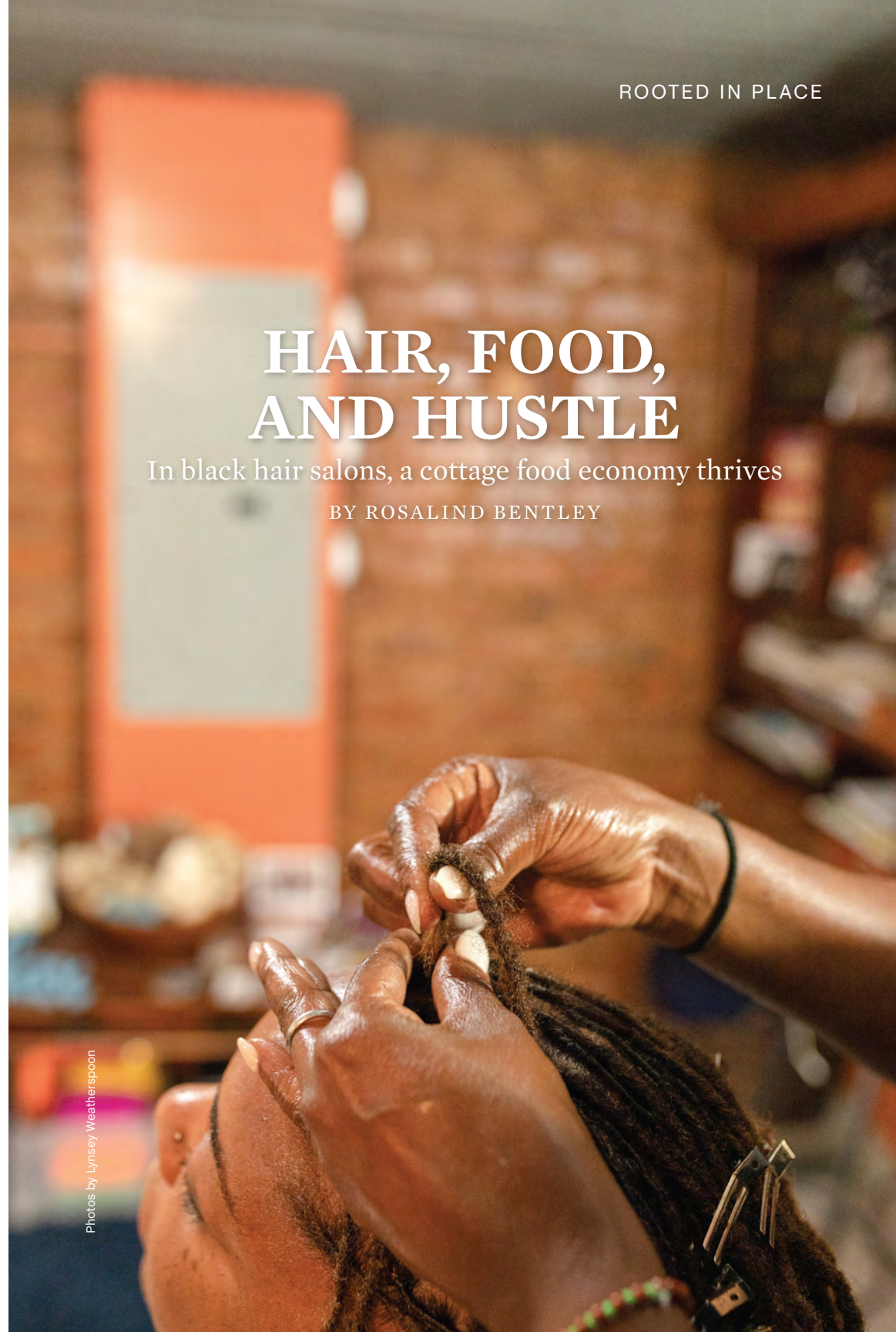
The lyrics and voices of 1982 still echo in my head. Nearly forty years after Bill Neal served his first dish of shrimp and grits and hired his first rock-and-roller dishwasher, I recognize that food held similar power in that moment. Together, those cultural products remind me of how this all began, of what was at stake, and of what's possible when we harness the power of creativity to make change in our backyards. ♡

John T. Edge is the founding director of the SFA and the host of TrueSouth on the SEC Network/ESPN.

HAIR, FOOD, AND HUSTLE

In black hair salons, a cottage food economy thrives

BY ROSALIND BENTLEY





THE ANNUAL FAMILY CHRISTMAS Eve dinner my partner and I host is a little fancy, so for last year's event I wanted an updo. It was to be a sweeping, modified beehive requiring Shannon, my stylist, to wash and deep condition my dreadlocks before twisting each salt-and-pepper strand tightly at the root, clamping the coils with clips as she went. Then, I'd sit under the hooded dryer for at least forty-five minutes, followed by another forty-five minutes of more twisting, more pinning, more winding, Shannon's nimble fingers weaving over and through as though shaping a seagrass basket.

All told, I'd be there three, maybe four hours.

Beauty has its price whether paid by wallet or clock, so I leaned my head back into the shampoo basin and she got to work. In a rush to get to my appointment on time, I'd skipped breakfast. My stomach growled. All Shannon had to snack on were a couple of granola bars, some pretzels, and a package of almonds lingering in a forlorn box.

As Shannon twirled the first cords, I flipped through a magazine.

"Oh, no," she said.

Her fingers froze.

"What?" I asked.

By her tone, I thought she'd seen some abnormality on my scalp.

"Everything ok?" I asked again.

"Yeah, it's just, it's...The Cobbler Man is here," Shannon stammered.

She meant dessert, not shoes.

"Is it nasty?"

"No! It's good. I can't—I'm not—oooo, I'm not supposed to have it."

She wiped her hands on a towel and reached for her purse.

WHEN SHANNON MOVED from the Buckhead salon where I first met her about four years ago to this new space where she is the sole operator, I was

happy for her. Yet selfishly I worried I'd miss the ritual and balm of a large African American salon: loud debates over Steve Harvey's latest gaffe; neo-soul or gospel blaring; the overheard prayer between a stylist and customer for a personal trial to soon pass. And one of the supreme joys of her old location was good food.

Getting our hair done can mean giving up the better part of a morning or afternoon. This food feels like a reward for endurance. Food for sale, by us, for us, each stylist's chair cradling an empty belly and thick wallet.

Atlanta is the capital of black hair. It's also the locus of a robust network

**Getting our hair done
can mean giving up
the better part of a
morning or afternoon.
Salon food feels like a
reward for endurance.**

of home cooks serving those doing hair and those getting our hair done. Shannon, who came up working in her stepmother's salon here, said she's never worked at a beauty shop where someone didn't come by selling plates. There's a scene in the 2005 comedy *Beauty Shop*, set in Atlanta, where a character hawks a cart full of soul food, from pig knuckles to Sock-It-To-Me cake. Vendors like that usually showed up at Shannon's old shop.

There was the chocolate-dipped-strawberry lady whose treats we savored near the NO FOOD sign by the drying station. There was the cookie lady, who sold snickerdoodles and oatmeal raisins in tiny bundles, sometimes still warm. Later, options expanded to include the brother who sells oxtail stew and jerk chicken in

a container small enough to balance on your lap, your salon cape serving as an oversized bib.

The Cobbler Man came into Shannon's new shop happy as a caroler and pulling a cooler full of treats. He wore a blazer, simple shirt, and crisp jeans. His jewelry had just the right amount of bling, and his hair and beard were lined so crisply he looked like he'd just slipped out of the barber's chair. Shannon was already a goner, but I was skeptical. He saw the faint grimace on my face. As he would later tell me, he guessed that I had been "traumatized by some nasty peach cobbler" before.

"Would you like to try the best peach cobbler in the history of the planet?" he asked.

I must have said, "Come on, bruh," or some other rebuff, because from the top of his cooler he picked up a small tray covered with communion-cup samples of the day's cobblers: classic peach and a concoction he called "fruit loop": apple, pear, and cherry. Red and blue colored sugar freckled the top. I took that one. He laced his hands and leaned back as I took my first bite.

The tiny cubes of fruit retained their structure. Bitsy dumplings stippled the filling. I bought three. Each pan was no bigger than my hand. He smiled, thanked us for our business and moved on to the next shop, satisfied his point was proven. (I would meet the Cobbler Man again in a couple of months and learn his name is Joshua Elijah. His late stepmother, Ivy Johnson, taught him to make the dessert as she had learned growing up in Mobile. He named his business "Ivy's Heavenly Cobbler" after her.)

When I got home, my hair fierce and redolent with aromatic oils, I put the cobblers on top of the kitchen stove and made a half-hearted offer to share the haul with my partner.

FOR MANY BLACK WOMEN, our mother's kitchens were our first beauty shops. They were the site of a shared ritual we were subjected to as girls. The kitchen symbolized nourishment, but it was also a place where our mother's hands acted on a precept rooted in white supremacy: Pretty hair was straight, not nappy.

If your mother didn't use a chemical straightener on your hair, she probably used a hot comb, as my mother did. She placed a low-backed stool or dining-room chair near the stove. The flame of a front burner flickered above simmer but well below boil. Then, my mother put the teeth of a metal straightening comb on the burner. My freshly washed and dried hair was parted into sections and rubbed with Ultra Sheen Creme Satin-Press. When she thought the comb was warm enough, she lifted it from the fire, quickly laid it on a white paper towel to make sure it didn't scorch, then ran it through my hair. The yellow grease sizzled and smoked. My head smelled of melting wax and submission. The process continued until every strand was straight. It remained that way for a week or so, or at least until moisture hit it—then it would puff and kink as nature intended. When that happened, it was time for the ritual once again.

Tiffany M. Gill and I commiserated about the practice recently during a conversation about the intersection of beauty shops and the plate economy. Gill is a professor of Africana Studies at the University of Delaware and author of *Beauty Shop Politics: African American Women's Activism in the Beauty Industry*.

For generations, beauty shops have been community gathering places for black women, spaces where we can be vulnerable. Inside, we don't have to code switch. We are in the care of someone who will lay hands on our hair and groom it into a style that gives us confidence to



face whatever comes next. Because black communities historically have nurtured informal economies when racism shuts them out of “legitimate” ones, the idea of the Cobbler Man or the Pound Cake Lady coming into a salon to sell a plate of comfort tracks.

Where and when the tradition began, Gill doesn’t know, but she said it is age-old. And while not all black salons welcome someone selling hot plates, the practice isn’t a pejorative within the larger community.

“These are spaces where African Americans who are entrepreneurs within the informal economy, those who are creating their own food and selling it, that beauty shops and barber shops become a safe place for them to see that,” Gill said. Because it’s not a place where people are going to ask, “Where’s your food license?”

THE PLATE ECONOMY, the informal food economy, the cottage food economy: Called by whatever name, it has always held special power in communities of color and immigrant communities. Wives sell homemade tamales to men on lunch break; siblings pinch tender dumpling dough into savory pouches to sell to devoted customers; elderly African American ladies freeze Kool-Aid or fruit punch in paper cups, then sell them for a nickel or a dime to neighborhood kids.

In the informal economy, there’s always the danger of getting caught. Yet sales pay mortgages, buy school clothes, and keep the lights on and gas flowing for people for whom the traditional economy is too high a hurdle to clear. Some cooks want the flexibility of staying home with their kids while still earning an income. Others don’t want to pay the fees of a commissary kitchen that would offer them a commercial-grade prep

space. Some don’t care to tangle with, or don’t know about, the layered licensing requirements many states demand of cottage food producers. Many states set caps on how much a cottage food business can earn per year.

Joshua Elijah’s career is built on the plate economy. I caught up with him again on a Saturday morning in early March in the suburban Atlanta home he shares with his fiancée. He’d been in the kitchen since 5 A.M., preparing the day’s inventory. At the stove, wisps of steam encircled Joshua’s right hand as he plunged kitchen shears into an enamel pot where apple slices bubbled

“The only way to survive is your food has to be excellent. You don’t have a website. You don’t have a building. You just have you and your food.”

in syrup. With each staccato *snip, snip, snip*, of the blades, the fruit slices became confetti. Again, I had not had breakfast. The aroma of warm sugar, nutmeg, cinnamon, and fruit made my belly cramp. He worked the dough on the granite countertop, panting gently as his thick fingers pushed. The crust, rich with lard, responded. “The crust is the star,” Joshua said. “It’s important that there’s crust and a peach in every bite.”

As he cooked, he told me his story. He’s forty-three years old and grew up in California. For a while he was a church musician, but when that didn’t pull in enough money, he said, he started

selling weed. Trying for a fresh start, he moved to Atlanta about ten years ago. With him he brought his stepmother’s cobbler recipe and a gift for salesmanship. Even with family here, he couldn’t get a foothold. At bottom, he borrowed \$35 in food stamps from a friend he was living with and made some cobbler. He took it to a barbershop in Stone Mountain. It sold out.

“Six months after, I was in the peach cobbler game,” he said.

That was about seven years ago. It’s all he’s done since, he told me. On a good day he can make \$500 from \$90 in supplies. A nice turn, considering Georgia’s cottage food law does not put a limit on sales. But Joshua has not gotten a license yet. He understands the rules are there so no one gets sick. He is part of an ecosystem of “people who have decided to declare economic justice for themselves, working out of their own kitchen,” as he put it. “But the only way to survive is your food has to be excellent. You don’t have a building. You don’t have a website. You just have you and your food.”

By chance, a few weeks later, he showed me what he meant. I was shadowing the Cocktail Lady, whose motto boasts that she brings “the party to you.” Joshua had bragged about her presentation: Each rainbow-hued drink is topped with a thick haze of vapor from a nugget of dry ice at the bottom of the glass. Candy-coated straws in contrasting colors make the finished drink look like a tropical spring break.

The Cocktail Lady and I were near the end of her salon rounds, on the city’s west side, when we ran into Joshua. She’d used the same sample all day. By 5 P.M., it had lost its froth—and its appeal.

“Uhhh, umm, you need to have that

smoking,” Joshua told her. “I don’t see any smoke. That needs to be right.”

His tone was more encouraging than competitive, a dynamic I witnessed among the vendors I saw.

As with the Cocktail Lady, Joshua usually runs into other vendors, like the Banana Pudding Man, the Dessert-in-a-Jar Lady, and one of the titans of the game, the elusive Isaac. He sells everything from curried shrimp to turkey sliders to grilled vegetables, always chilled and ready for the microwave. (Stylists are often so busy they have to fit in meals when they can.) When I finally caught up with him, he told me he now splits his time between beauty shops and film sets. But for Joshua, and the other vendors I met this spring, salons remain their mainstay. As black women, we are going to get our hair done, pressed, natural, weaved, or otherwise. And we are going to eat.

That Saturday in March, when I met him at his house, Joshua let me tag along on his Saturday rounds. He paid a friend to drive so he could field call-in orders. By the time we hit the tenth shop, he was running low on inventory. Three ladies were lined up under dryers. 2Pac’s classic, “I Ain’t Mad at Cha,” rolled from the speakers. “*You tryin’ hard to maintain, then go ‘head cuz I ain’t mad at cha.*”

“Would you like to try?” Joshua asked, holding out a tray of both samples. “It’s the best peach cobbler on the planet.”

“What’s this green stuff?” one of them asked.

Joshua explained that the color-coded sugars indicated each flavor. Green meant apple. Peach was unadorned.

They each took a cup. They tasted. Then at least one of them reached for her purse. ♡

Rosalind Bentley is an SFA Smith Fellow and a senior writer with The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. Follow her on Twitter @rozrbentley.