SFA

GRAVY

WINTER 2021
NO. 78

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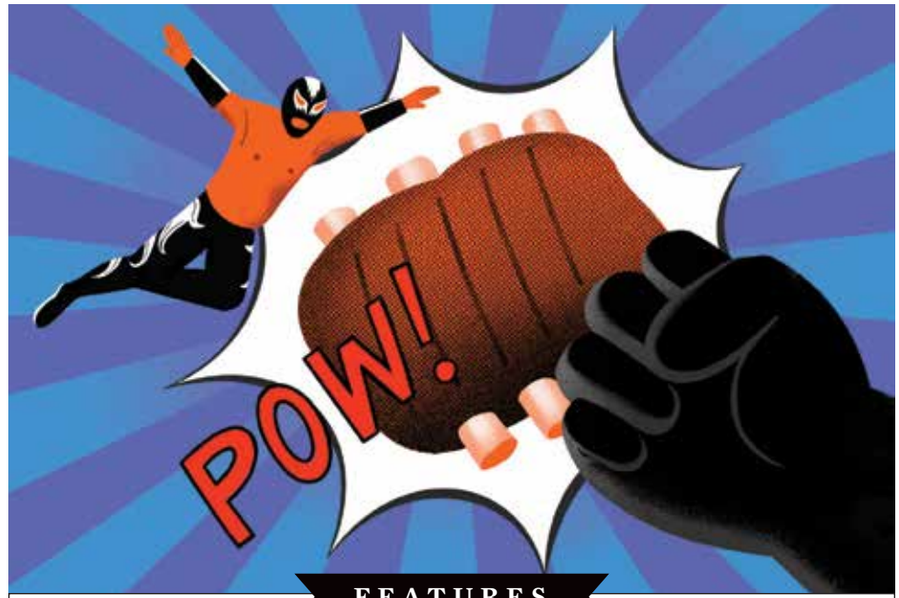
ISSUE NO. 78 • WINTER 2021



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ALL THE RAGE

Punching back at 2020

BY SARA CAMP MILAM

Adobe Stock

THIS MORNING, I GOOGLED PUNCHING bags. I have never used one, and I really wouldn't know where to start with the punching. Or kicking? You get to kick it too, right? Do you shuffle your feet between jabs, like you're waiting to return a serve on the tennis court? I can see myself hurting my hand. I can see myself losing my balance and falling on my rear. I can see the bag swinging back and knocking me over. I think I need one anyway. It's been that kind of year.

All sorts of consumer goods have sold out in the last nine months—toilet paper, of course. But also Peloton bikes and backyard swing sets. Outdoor heaters. I haven't heard about a shortage of punching bags, but it wouldn't surprise me. I've been known to literally run from confrontation, yet here I am with the urge to whale on a punching bag. I imagine there are a lot of *Gravy* readers with similar urges, maybe for reasons much better and more valid than my own.

Here at the hinge between 2020 and 2021, I'm frustrated with myself for being unable to get enough done, despite support from a loving and thoughtful husband, wonderful childcare, and coworkers whose role in my life approaches that of family. I spend too much time feeling spoiled and whiny and useless. When I'm in the car, or on a walk, or even playing with my children, my head is filled with thoughts big and small.

I spool out endless to-do lists. I fear for my family's health. I puzzle over work and motherhood and societal problems. Occasionally, as I'm jogging under a blue sky or pulling my children to the dead end of our quiet street in their wagon, I have a glimmer of hope that I could help: Through my work, maybe I can push one small something in the right direction.

I've been so afraid this year. I've been angry and confused and sad. But I've also spent more time outside than I can remember. The weather in 2020 was uncannily beautiful. By my calculation, I logged some 500 miles pushing our stroller. I saw the wisteria bloom in March and the leaves turn red and gold in November. I visited with neighbors. Some were laid off. Some were lonely. Some have been sick. Some gave birth. We became friends.

I listened to *Switched on Pop* and *Planet Money* and The Hold Steady (old) and Taylor Swift (new). I listened to spy novels and political satire. In the late afternoons, I drove the country roads around Oxford while my son napped in the backseat. In the early mornings, I read mysteries and drank coffee and watched the sun rise out of a gap in the houses across the street. Come nighttime, my husband cooked dinner and I put the children to bed. We ate on the couch and marveled at how tired we were. At how much we had to do. At how little of a dent we seemed to make each day. We went through a lot of Jeni's Darkest Chocolate ice cream.

There were times when my work really seemed to matter. When I was inspired. In May, we hosted a writing workshop and I got to see—yes, over Zoom—the smiles of writers having breakthroughs and pushing their stories to new places. In September and again in December, I worked with writers I admire to edit the fall and winter issues of *Gravy*. And in October, I edited scripts for a podcast season on climate change. I hope you'll listen. We approach a global crisis through relatable, individual stories—the kinds of stories you'll find in these pages, too.

I almost feel sorry for 2021. This year can't possibly live up to the expectations heaped upon it by 8 billion souls who need a break, in 8 billion different ways. I hope we all get one. There might not be enough punching bags to go around.

Debra Freeman writes about the intersection of race, culture, and Southern food. She is the managing editor of *Southern Grit* magazine. Her writing has appeared in *Huffington Post* and *The New York Times*, and she has provided cultural commentary for BBC Radio and other international outlets. She enjoys hard-shell fried crab (a Hampton Roads, Virginia, delicacy) and whole hog barbecue. Freeman attended the 2019 SFA writing workshop. Her hopes for 2021 are to gather with family and friends more often, and to be able to dine out in restaurants and enjoy conversations and laughs over food cooked by someone else.

Ben Gray is an Atlanta-based visual communicator with more than twenty-five years of professional experience as a photojournalist, videographer, photo editor, and communications officer. He recently returned to Atlanta after spending four years living in Jerusalem and photographing Palestinian Christians in the West Bank and Jordan. Outside of photography, Gray spends his time riding motorcycles and running long distances through the woods. His greatest hope for 2021 is that we will all be able to hug our friends again.

Jackson Joyce is a Louisiana-born artist who seeks to paint a world where things look the way they feel. He received his BFA from the Rhode Island School of Design in 2018, and now lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. In addition to his studio practice, he has created art for Google, Warby Parker, and *The New York Times*. After a year of uncertainty, he looks forward to making and keeping plans in 2021. One of those plans is to gather with his family over a bucket of crawfish at Marilynn's Place in Shreveport.

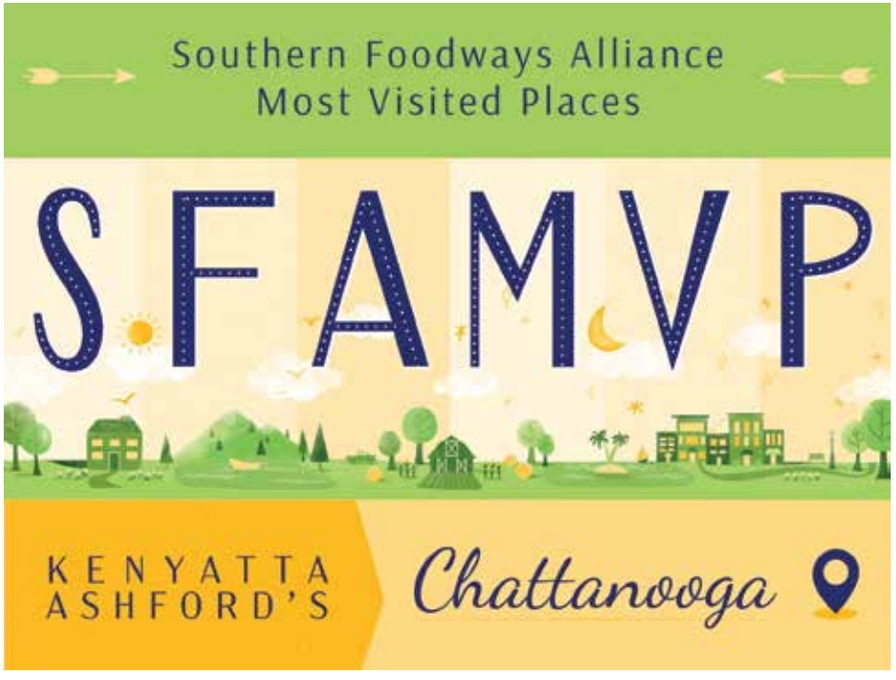
Top to bottom: Charles Long, John Glenn, Jackson Joyce

Delphine Lee is an illustrator based in Washington, DC, who created the cover and table of contents illustrations for this issue. Her art has appeared in *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and *Science News*. She worked as a fashion designer in New York City before a sabbatical in Latin America inspired her to pursue a second career in art and visual storytelling. Her greatest hope for 2021 is to be able to munch pork dumplings in a cherished hole-in-the-wall eatery, surrounded by some of her favorite humans.

After a decade-long career in IT, **Mandy Morris** pursued her passion for food by attending culinary school. Since graduating, she's held a variety of positions in the food industry: *garde manger* in a Michelin-starred kitchen, pastry cook at a *Top Chef* winner's patisserie, assistant food stylist, and freelance recipe tester and developer. She's currently the culinary content manager at June Life, a tech startup that makes a smart oven. Her new puppies, Cap and Harper, dominate her free time and her phone's camera roll. Her hope for 2021 is that they stop having accidents inside the house.

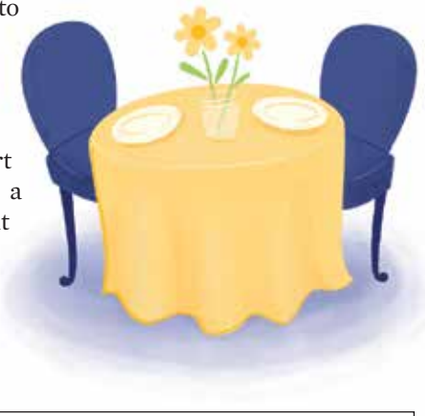
Top to bottom: Jordi Busque, Erin Ng, Jennifer Epperson

Kayla Stewart is a freelance writer who will consider herself a Houstonian no matter where she lives (she lives in Harlem). In normal times, she can be found reading, running, or traveling, often playing Sudoku on a plane or train. In COVID times, she can be found rereading her favorite books, biking, looking at food photos online, and scrolling through Wikipedia to see what's true on *The Crown*. She hosts conversations on *Black Food Folks*, and her writing can be found in *Eater*, *The New York Times*, and *Grub Street*. She hopes that, at some point in 2021, she will be able to sit indoors for more than five minutes and not freak out.



I LIVED THE FIRST FIVE YEARS OF MY LIFE in the Carrollton neighborhood of New Orleans, near Xavier University. As a boy, we moved over to Algiers. I came to Chattanooga in 2003, married my wife, Tomeka, and stayed to raise a family. This city is growing. Watch this town, and you can see the South change.

My new project, Neutral Ground, now part of a business incubator called Proof, is a neighborhood restaurant for serious food at a fair price that's not fussy. We focus on po-boys, yakamein, and specials that highlight the African diaspora. We plan to offer internships and scholarships to young people interested in the food industry.



Neutral Ground

The name comes from my old Carrollton neighborhood in New Orleans. We would stand in the neutral ground to catch the streetcar or bus go by. The menu comes from my childhood, too. My uncle, Walter Dyer—he was my *Paran* (godfather)—drove taxis like my father, Leroy Ashford, still does. Uncle Walter would carry a bottle of Tabasco with him when he drove, to top off his yakamein. He loved that stuff.

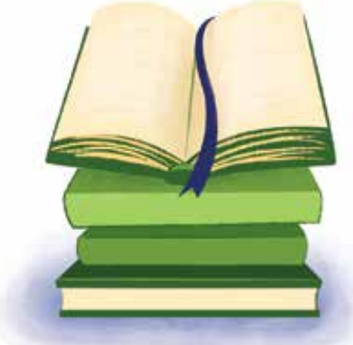
Illustrations by Bridgette Blanton / Tiny Pencil Studio

Carniceria Loa #7

This is my spot. I come for ripe plantains and ripe avocados. It's the kind of place to buy chicken feet, liver, and hibiscus flowers to make tea. And when I shop, I eat their tacos. They serve lengua and carne asada, but I usually get the carnitas.

McKay's Books

It's a used bookstore with lots of cookbooks—lots of hidden gems. I can't promise you the same luck, but a friend of a friend bought a first edition of a James Beard cookbook here. For a really good price. And it was signed.



Morning Walk

I walk my neighborhood, Fort Cheatham, in the mornings, to see what's going on and for the exercise. It's full of working people. I recognize this neighborhood won't be like this for long. Gentrification is coming. When I walk, I see all kind of businesses—contractors, printers, building supply companies, plumbing companies, and more. And I wonder if the money they make stays in this neighborhood. I wonder if the people who own these businesses employ people in this neighborhood. Walk a neighborhood full of working people and you can learn a city.

This is the first in an ongoing digital and print series, underwritten by The Mountain Valley Spring Water.

ALONE, TOGETHER

The promise of the booth

BY JOHN T. EDGE

ALONG THE FAR RIGHT WALL AT Snackbar here in Oxford stretches a row of six-person high-back booths. Constructed from plywood and foam cushion, illuminated by demure fixtures that cast flattering light, those five booths are where my wife, Blair, and I convene Saturday-night birthday parties, perch for Tuesday date nights, and retreat for private moments that gain resonance in public. We love those booths so much that, fearful of being relegated to a table downstairs, I sometimes lie when I make a reservation, claiming we will show with an acceptable-sized party of four.

In 2021, SFA explores natural, built, and imagined environments. Writing here in *Gravy*, I aim to ask questions about how we make and respond to built environments. I've been asking those questions since I was a boy who wanted to be an architect, designing second-floor additions to our old farmhouse. In my thirties, I proposed a public sculpture to commemorate the struggle for equal access to education in the state of Mississippi. More recently, I've gathered for lunches with our town planner to talk about public spaces and building codes.

I fell for booths as a young man. At the Mayflower in Athens, across from the University of Georgia campus, I slid into vinyl booths to waylay hangovers with sausage biscuits and cheese grits. After college in Atlanta, I dated a woman who craved club sandwiches at Houston's, the small chain that began in Nashville and earned a national reputation for well-executed American standards and well-conceived dining rooms, dominated by high-back booths wrapped in leather.

Ed Seiber, an Atlanta architect, helped me understand my attraction to those restaurants. When he started out, Ed worked for a firm that worked with Houston's. "They liked Pullman booths,"

Jackson Joyce

Booths appeal to our animal selves. They protect our front and back and offer us a way to see out and see others.

he told me when I called, referring to the luxe Pullman sleeper cabins on which train passengers once traveled long routes. "Two facing two, or three facing three, we put booths in places with high traffic flow," where they served as bulwarks. "Those booths gave diners a sense of control over their territory."

In the 1972 book *Defensible Space*, architect Oscar Newman argued that humans are drawn to environments where we can ensure our security. He was thinking about how multiunit housing design can drive perceptions of neighborhood safety and deter crime. Those same tenets apply to restaurant design: Booths appeal to our animal selves. They protect our front and back and offer us a way to see out and see others.

Patric Kuh, author of *The Last Days of Haute Cuisine*, recently made a midcareer transition from writing about restaurants to working the front of the house in a Los Angeles restaurant. On a recent phone call, we discovered a shared fascination with *cabinets particulier*, a fixture of Parisian dining for most of the nineteenth century. Referred to by critics of the day as public boudoirs, these wooden cabinets were designed for more privacy than we now associate with booths. That intimacy earned some restaurants unwelcome reputations. By the early part of the twentieth century, some cities had passed laws that forbade curtains or doors on the fronts of booths.

Though that style of booths is now less common, intimacy has remained a promise of booth seating, Patric told me: "People want semi-privacy in a dining room; they want to seclude while still participating in the energy of the room." That's what Blair and I want in a Snackbar booth—a night alone in public, among carousing friends and strangers.

Patric also told me that our relationship to booths has begun to change again. Until this year, he said, restaurant trends pointed toward communal tables and long banquettes. Now, because of the ongoing pandemic, booths are popular because the physical separation they promise is believed to offer some protection from viral spread.

This page and opposite: John Vachon/Library of Congress

WHEN I MOVED from Atlanta to Mississippi in 1995, Snackbar and its voluminous booths were still fifteen years away. I tucked in at Lusco's, the 1933 vintage restaurant in the Delta town of Greenwood. Famous for small, curtain-fronted rooms and debauchery, Lusco's seemed just the sort of anachronism I expected to find in this strange and new place called Mississippi.

ABOVE AND OPPOSITE: Diners in booths at the Busy Bee Restaurant, Radford, VA, 1940

As I began to travel more, in search of restaurant experiences, I carried the perceived singularity of Lusco's in my head. But that idea soon fell apart on trips to San Francisco, where century-old restaurants like Tadich Grill, Sam's Grill, and Far East Café feature vintage curtained booths that gesture back to those particular cabinets and forward to those Snackbar booths that are worth lying for.

Months have now passed since Blair and I last dined in a Snackbar booth. As I write these words, we're due in thirty for dinner outside, underneath the heat lamps, on a concrete porch that faces a blacktop parking lot. I have booked the corner table, against the side wall of the yoga studio. Looking out over the cars in the parking lot, Blair calls this view Detroit Beach. Though it's no booth, the location does offer some privacy, and there's no sand to worry about.

John T. Edge, founding director of the SFA, also teaches in the low-residency MFA program in narrative nonfiction at the University of Georgia.

What restaurants hold your favorite booths? What stories do you want to share from your time in booths? What Fall Symposium speaker would you like to hear talk about booths and broader issues of restaurant design and built environments? Write johnt@southernfoodways.org *and we'll publish the most compelling ideas via the weekly SFA Digest.*

HARVEST OF PATERNALISM

Revisiting a classic

BY GUSTAVO ARELLANO

I NEVER CARED FOR THANKSGIVING—the buckets of leftovers, the excess of casseroles, the faux chumminess from cousins who can't even bother to like your Instagram posts.

So the coronavirus pandemic gave me an understandable excuse to skip out on a big gathering and stay at home with a bourbon in one hand and a documentary on my laptop.

I watched *Harvest of Shame*, a legendary one-hour CBS special that originally aired the day after Thanksgiving 1960. It was hosted and narrated by Edward R. Murrow, in one of his last journalistic efforts before leaving the network to join the Kennedy administration.

Harvest of Shame was groundbreaking. Not since Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* had a piece of mainstream media attacked the American food industry with such righteous anger. It's remembered as a masterpiece and seen as the culmination of a career.

Sixty years later, the film is a mainstay of film and labor-history courses and shared in food-justice circles. Its indicting conclusion sadly remains true today—how Eisenhower's America, home to the "best-fed people in the world," ignored the "workers in the sweatshops of soil" who kept them fed.

This page and opposite: CBS Photo Archive/Getty Images

ABOVE: Edward R. Murrow appears in *Harvest of Shame*; OPPOSITE: Migrant workers travel to their next job in a still from the documentary.

It had been years since I'd watched *Harvest of Shame*. This time, I caught a crucial flaw. Murrow sought to shock a complacent American public into action. But to do so, he and his crew took agency away from the very workers they purported to champion: poor Black and white Southerners.

HARVEST OF SHAME begins in Belle Glade, Florida, which remains the heart of sugarcane production in the state. From there, hundreds of Black men, women, and children cram into buses and trucks to follow the winter harvest north along U.S. Route 17.

"This is not taking place in the Congo," says Murrow in his unforgettable baritone. "It has nothing to do with Johannesburg or Cape Town...This is Florida. These are citizens of the United States."

Cameras follow these buses to small towns where the men, women, and children stay for a couple of weeks to work, then move on to the next harvest. Elizabeth City, North Carolina, for beans. Powell's Landing, Virginia, for corn.

Along the trail, Murrow's reporters interview migrant workers in the shantytowns that pass as their neighborhoods. Nearly all of them wear stoic, defeated expressions. "Do you ever think you'll get out of this work?" one asks Allean King, a twenty-nine-year-old mother of fourteen. "No, sir," is her reply.

The cameras fan out from the Southeast to points north and west. The only glimmers of hope for farmworker reform are anywhere but the South, *Harvest of Shame* argues. In New York, Black teachers vainly try to teach children as much as possible before they go back home, probably to drop out of school.

And out in the Central Valley of California, one scene shows Filipino, Latino, and white pickers attending an AFL-CIO

meeting to urge unity and union. Cesar Chavez would soon emerge from that very area to organize them.

"The migrants have no lobby," Murrow tells viewers at the end of the program. "Only an enlightened, aroused, and perhaps angered public opinion can do anything about the migrants."

It was a stirring speech, I thought, as I closed my laptop to soak in what I had just seen. But I realized that *Harvest of Shame* displays a paternalism that hasn't aged well, along with an absence of true systemic critique. It takes as fact that farmworker exploitation exists without examining the systems that make such abject conditions so easy to continue.

For a film with so many Black faces, a lack of acknowledgement that they were just two to three generations removed from slavery reads as insulting today. The closest reference to the white supremacy that continues to dominate the farming world is when Murrow quotes a farmer who admits, "We used to own our slaves. Now, we just rent them."

Murrow's biggest sin was his lack of faith in farmworkers, especially those in the South, to better themselves. Salvation, according to him, could only truly come from an activist government and the charity of liberal viewers. His rousing words did little for farmworkers. *Harvest of Shame* didn't lead to any fundamental changes in our food system.

I know I'm applying twenty-first-century social-justice standards to Murrow, who never stood on the wrong side of history. The fact he chose as one of his last subjects such an explosive topic—and aired it right after Thanksgiving, no less—speaks to the integrity of the newsman.

I'd be more forgiving if there weren't already voices in the media who not only had covered farmworkers, but had given them agency and acknowledged their potential power. I'm thinking of Carey McWilliams, longtime editor of *The Nation*, and of the photographer Dorothea Lange.

And the South would prove Murrow wrong. In one scene, Murrow informs viewers, "There is no case upon the record of a child of a migrant laborer ever receiving a college diploma." A generation later, that would change, thanks to the University of South Florida's Center for Migrant Education, which helps farmworkers and their children graduate from high school and college.

Soon after *Harvest of Shame* aired, former sharecropper Fannie Lou Hamer used her childhood in the cotton fields of Mississippi to push Black people to vote. In more recent years, the North Carolina Farmworkers' Project has spread the gospel of *promotoras* (community health workers) through the tobacco and sweet potato fields of Johnston County. Similar organizations in other Southern states have done the same.

And about an hour away from Belle Glade, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) began in 1993 to push for a radical vision of equity and activism among Mexican, Central American, and Haitian tomato pickers in Florida. Their work has driven fast-food chains across the country to pay more for the crops they buy from Florida farmers, which has allowed farmworkers to double their salaries.

I now think of *Harvest of Shame* in a category with *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and *Hillbilly Elegy*. They are stylish, powerful works that purport to tell the truth about a damned South, yet they rely on clichés that obscure the agency of the subjects they claim to defend.

We must listen to farmworkers themselves, not self-appointed saviors, to see them clearly.

Gustavo Arellano is Gravy*'s columnist and a features writer for the* LA Times.

A FRUITFUL JOURNEY

My watermelon summer

BY DEBRA FREEMAN

Photos by Joshua Fitzwater

I ASKED THE HARDWARE STORE clerk if he had wolf urine in stock.

"What did you just say?" he asked with a puzzled look.

I cleared my throat and repeated my request. The clerk threw his head back and laughed until tears wet his eyes.

I tried to explain that I wanted to deter deer from eating the watermelons that my boyfriend, Fitz, and I were growing. How Fitz stumbled across this tidbit on the Internet, I have no idea. The clerk said, "Ma'am, I've worked here for thirty years and no one has ever asked me for wolf urine. I can't wait to get home and tell everybody about this."

I returned to my car, leaned back in my seat, closed my eyes, and thought about the rabbit hole that led me to enter a store and ask for canine excrement with a straight face. I blame the Bradford watermelon.

Almost two years ago, I read about the Bradford watermelon in a magazine. Nathaniel Bradford cultivated the melon on his farm near Sumter, South Carolina, in the 1850s. Prized for its sweetness, the Bradford fell out of commercial production because its delicate rind makes shipping impossible. I was instantly intrigued. Could this melon really taste so different from the mass-produced, grocery store variety? I had to find out. Nathaniel Bradford's descendant and namesake, Nat Bradford, grows Bradford watermelons today. I went to his website and paid twenty dollars to reserve a melon. When it ripened in late August, Fitz and I would drive to Sumter to pick it up—a 670-mile round trip from our home in Richmond, Virginia.

Clockwise from top left: Ancient Crookneck watermelon seeds; the author with a Congo watermelon in Delaware; Ancient Crookneck watermelon; the author's boyfriend, Joshua "Fitz" Fitzwater, growing watermelons in Fredericksburg, VA.

That summer, Fitz and I started tracking down other heirloom watermelons. I'm not entirely sure why either of us became so attached to finding watermelons. We enjoy doing things out of the ordinary, and it was even better that it was food related.

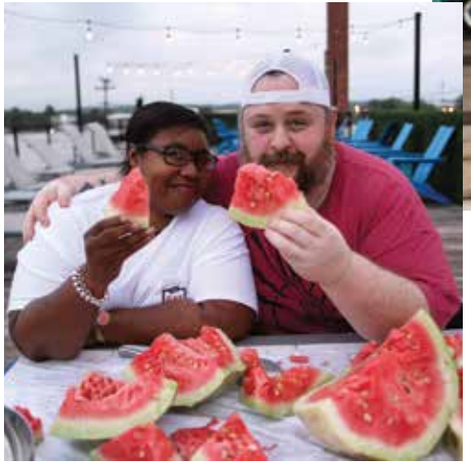
On Saturday mornings, we would get up at 5 A.M. and hit the road. In the car, we'd jostle between Fitz's preferred metal-guitar-and-scream-singing soundtrack and my more melodious r&b and pop choices. We'd finally settle on '80s radio—thank goodness for Phil Collins.

Once we'd get to a farmers' market,

> When the melon ripened in late August, Fitz and I would drive to Sumter to pick it up—a 670-mile round trip from our home in Richmond, Virginia.

we'd needle anyone with watermelons. We'd knock on the fruits to hear a hollow sound—an indicator of sweetness—and look for the discolored "foot" on the bottom of the melon, a sure sign of ripeness. Fitz and I would tag-team farmers with questions about variety, flesh color, and provenance. If the answers were satisfactory, we'd buy a few melons and place them in a rolling cooler.

Our drives took us to farms and farmers' markets up and down the East Coast, and we tried as many as we could find: Ali Babas, Missouri Heirlooms, Yeni Dunyas, Crimson Sweets, Ancient Crooknecks, Odell's Whites, Royal Goldens, Moon and Stars. As soon as we got back to our hotel room, we'd cut them open



THIS PAGE, clockwise from top left: Bradford watermelons in Sumter, SC; Freeman in PA; Freeman and Fitzwater enjoy an Odell's White; OPPOSITE, clockwise from top left: Freeman holds a Moon and Stars; Brad Constable farms Odell's White and Early Moonbeam watermelons near Farmville, VA; Buckle up, Bradford!

Eventually we filled the refrigerator shelves so full of watermelons that there wasn't room for a gallon of milk.

and take photos from almost every angle. Fitz would take a seed out and study its color and shape to determine whether or not he was going to save it. I don't think either of us knew what he was looking for—it came down to a gut feeling. We'd scoop a hunk of flesh out of the heart and taste it, seeing if it was juicy and firm, assessing whether it was picked at the right time.

On a muggy weekday afternoon in Norfolk, we cut open a yellow-fleshed Moon and Stars on a park bench and were stunned that it tasted like an apricot. Another day, following a morning rain shower, we grabbed a knife and some paper towels and ate an Ali Baba on the rooftop of our apartment. After driving through Amish country in Pennsylvania, we brought back a watermelon of unknown type. When we placed it on the kitchen counter, it began to hiss as the flesh seeped out of the rind. We threw it in the trash immediately.

We began to talk about harvesting seeds. We searched online for the elusive Orangeglo and found the closest grower was in Louisiana. We haven't made it there—yet. Abstract ideas became tangible as seeds overtook our kitchen. They soaked in cups of water beside the sink. They waited in airtight containers that lined the counter. Eventually we filled the refrigerator shelves so full of watermelons that there wasn't room for a gallon of milk.

Watermelon season ended, but our quest did not. After a long winter spent poring over seed catalogs, our conversations turned to trying to grow them ourselves. This was not an easy feat since we live in the middle of the city, without arable land. A friend knew members of the Patawomeck Tribe, who allowed us to farm on a small section of their land in Fredericksburg, Virginia, an hour north of us. We planted Ancient Crookneck melons—one of the same varieties Native Americans grew centuries ago—in indigenous soil.

We harvested seeds from Odell's White, a watermelon attributed to an African American seedsman named Harry in South Carolina, who was possibly enslaved by pomologist William Summer. The melon got its name from Milton Odell, a South Carolina grower in the 1840s.

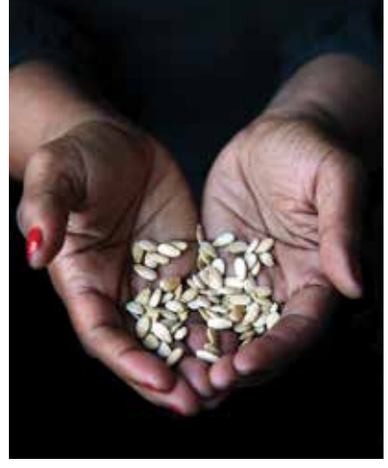
ONCE WE TASTED what he developed—sweet, but not overbearingly so, with crisp flesh—we decided to share those seeds with African American farmers such as Chip Powell, who was delighted to learn the history of the Odell's White watermelon and to plant them in his fields.

Fitz set out to begin the process of

Clockwise from top left: A ripe Odell's White; Freeman's daughter with an Ancient Crookneck-Moon and Stars hybrid; heirloom watermelon hot sauce; Brad Constable and his son at Crumptown Farms

creating an original melon by cross-pollinating the Ali Baba with the Ancient Crookneck to create the Double A Sweet, a watermelon that would combine the firm texture of the Ancient Crookneck with the sweetness of the Ali Baba. Creating a new watermelon takes approximately three years for the traits to fully develop. This year, the seeds were brown, a mix of the red seeds of the Ancient Crookneck and the black seeds of the Ali Baba. The melon flesh was a pinkish hue and it was extremely juicy, as evidenced by the stains on our shirts, with a medium level of sweetness. Next year, we will see if any of these traits carry over, or if any new characteristics appear. Hopefully, by year three, we will produce a melon that will be uniquely Virginian.

By the end of the summer, we successfully grew nearly 100 watermelons and put them into the hands of chefs who made a myriad of dishes like watermelon chow chow, smoked watermelon barbecue sandwiches, and watermelon jam. With chef Forrest Warren of Smoke in Newport News, we created a vinegar-based watermelon barbecue sauce. And with Floyd Thomas of Redwood Smoke Shack in Norfolk, we blended a



Hopefully, by year three, we will produce a melon that will be uniquely Virginian.

Clockwise from top left: Freeman holds Odell's White seeds; Fitz holds a Moon and Stars; smoked Ancient Crookneck

hot sauce of Scotch bonnet peppers, watermelon, and lime. Both sold out quickly thanks to Facebook, and we'll offer them again next year.

What started as a weekend hobby morphed into an obsession. We've introduced melons to Virginia soil and invited people to taste the past.

At the end of last season, we tilled the land in Fredericksburg to prepare the ground for winter. What was once a growing maze of greenery is now a plot of dirt. And while the wolf urine—which I now know is more commonly referred to as deer repellent—was not effective, we learned that a combination of motion-sensor lights and pie pans tied to stakes kept the deer away from our melons. Next summer, we'll be out in the Virginia heat for hours each day. Covered in dirt, Fitz will hand-water each plant. Once again, we'll turn seeds into sweetness.

Debra Freeman is the managing editor of Southern Grit Magazine. *She has written about the intersection of food and race for* Plate Magazine, Gastro Obscura, Broadway Black, *and* Pit Magazine.

Minding the Store

A family legacy is gone but not erased.

by MANDY MORRIS

On a December day two years ago,

my mother texted me a photo that catapulted me back to my childhood. With my thumb and index finger on the phone screen, I pinch-zoomed on the picture. Even though the Wing's Grocery sign was missing from the top right corner of the brick wall, I still recognized the building. Nearly all the faded red bricks that formed the exterior wall, once painted with advertisements for Falstaff Beer and Wonder Bread, were now stacked on three pallets surrounded by rubble and broken bricks, exposing the hollow guts of the roofless skeleton structure. The store facade,

LEFT: The author's grandmother Choy See Wing (Poh Poh), at the Wing's checkout counter, ca. late 1980s; BELOW: Main Street, Webb, MS, 1997

facing Main Street, was still intact, but the neighboring storefront, like the rest of downtown Webb, Mississippi, no longer existed. Over two thousand miles away, in my San Francisco apartment, I took the time to reflect and say goodbye.

Wing's Grocery was more than our family business. When I say I grew up there, it's not a figure of speech. My sister and I were the third generation of our family to live in the two-bedroom apartment at the back of the store. I raced my red tricycle down those grocery aisles. I hid from thunderstorms in empty cardboard boxes that once held rolls of paper towels. I ran from the kitchen in the living quarters to the soup aisle to fetch a can of Campbell's chicken broth when my grandmother asked for *gai tong*.

I left the store behind when I went to college. After graduation I departed the South, eager to define a life for myself. I am the youngest member of my family and the last to live in one of the original Mississippi Delta Chinese grocery stores. Not quite Chinese enough, not quite Southern enough, I've always felt trapped between generations and identities. The store is one long chapter of my family history. It's a story that begins in the Guangdong province of southern China, nearly seven decades before I was born.

I peddled up the main aisle, past the ice cream case and checkout counter, past the Nabs and Wonder Bread on my left and the canned goods and condiments on my right.

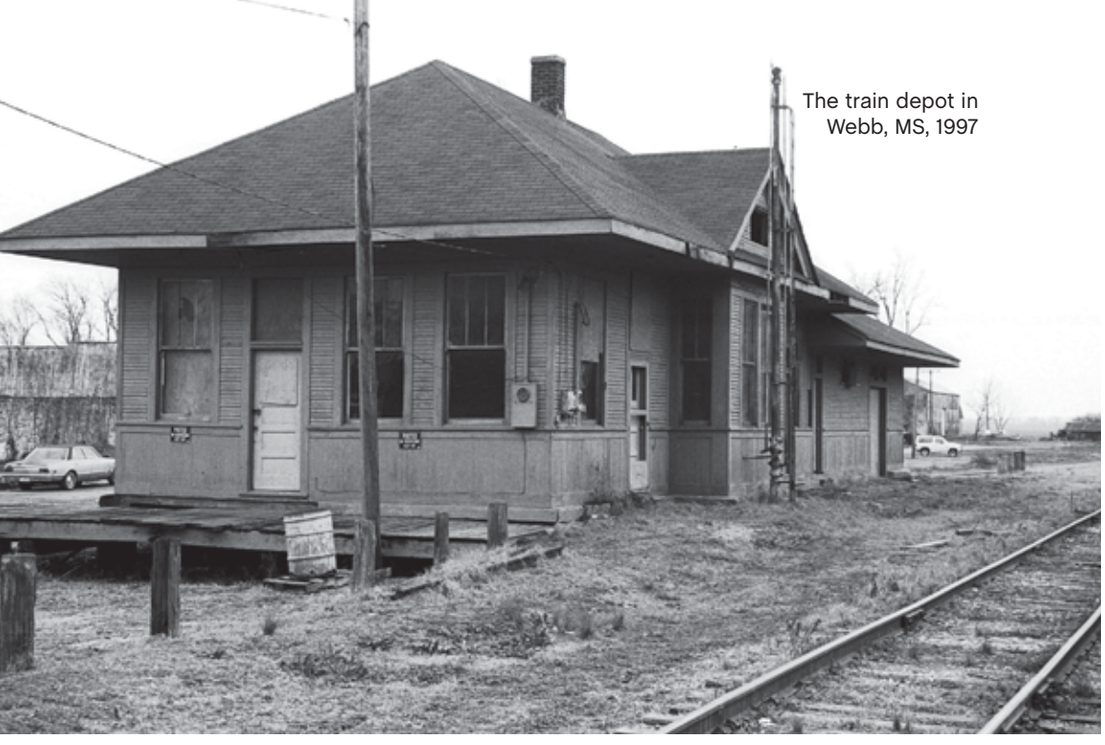
MY FAMILY'S PATH to the United States did not follow a simple trajectory. Like so many immigration stories, it was a complicated back-and-forth. It began in an era when global travel took weeks, not hours, and family members maintained long-distance relationships by telegram rather than text message. In 1910, my great-grandfather, Hong Ah Wing, boarded the *Princess Victoria* in Hong Kong, bound for Seattle. It was the first of several trips he'd make to North America by sea. He was twenty-five years old, and he left his wife and son, my grandfather, in Taishan. Born into a family of merchants, he saw little long-term opportunity in the city of his birth.

Despite the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, my great-grandfather believed he could build a better future in the United States. As a merchant, he qualified for permission to enter the country. His wife and child did not. From the Pacific Northwest, he made his way south and east, working odd jobs in laundries and restaurants. By 1920, he had settled in the Mississippi Delta.

Chinese immigrants first came to the Delta to work in cotton fields after the Civil War. Often referred to as the third race in the segregated South, the Chinese were not social or economic peers to whites, but were afforded more opportunities than Black people. Unlike Black Southerners, the Chinese were able to get credit or capital from white-owned banks to open businesses. So the Chinese transitioned from the fields, opening small grocery stores that competed with plantation commissaries. They sourced basics like meat, cornmeal, and molasses, often underselling the plantation stores.

The author rides her tricycle in Wing's Grocery, early 1980s.

Photos courtesy of Mandy Morris



The train depot in Webb, MS, 1997

My great-grandfather apprenticed in one of these grocery stores, eventually opening his own shop, Wing's Cash Store, in the 1920s in Jonestown, Mississippi. By then, my great-grandmother and grandfather had made their way to the United States as well. The growing family lived in the back of the store, where my great-grandmother gave birth to three more sons and a daughter. In the early 1930s, they moved into a house. It was the last house in the white neighborhood, one block from the beginning of the Black neighborhood. They literally lived between the races.

Hong Ah Wing's oldest son, my grandfather Hin Fook Wing, made the long journey from China at different stages in life: at the age of 13 in 1922, again at 21, once more at the age of 30, and finally at the age of 38 in 1947. Between trips, he married my grandmother and had four children in China, all while working for his father learning the trade. He ran a branch of his father's grocery business in Friars Point, about thirteen miles from Jonestown. Although the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed in 1943, allowing the immigration of Chinese women and children, arranging for his family to move to America was not straightforward. The federal government imposed a stringent quota for Chinese immigration, allowing only 105 visas per year. World War II was raging as well. Finally, nearly three years after the war ended, my grandmother, Choy See, and infant mother arrived on February 9, 1948, in San Francisco. They were likely processed by immigration officers at the U.S. Appraiser's Building, about three miles from my apartment.

My grandfather moved his young family thirty-five miles south of Jonestown and set up shop in Webb, in western Tallahatchie county. The business district centered around Main Street and the depot. Freight trains hauling cotton, soybeans, and other commodities ran past his store, which was catty-corner to the depot. This building had living quarters in the back. This was a common living arrangement for Chinese store owners in the Jim Crow-era Delta. It provided a sense of security for the business, and for families who didn't fit into the racially binary neighborhoods of the South. Although the groceries were scattered across the Delta, Chinese families were able to form a closely knit community. Mahjong tiles shuffled and clicked during all-night games between store owners. Their teenage sons and daughters donned their best suits and swing dresses and danced to Elvis Presley and Frank Sinatra in rented ballrooms in the larger Delta towns. Families swapped long beans, bitter melon, and fresh water chestnuts from home gardens. These traditional ingredients found their way into shared dishes for Sunday potlucks.

My grandfather's business flourished. It served Black and white customers, including those who needed credit until payday. His kids and other Delta Chinese attended white schools. They no longer sat in the colored waiting room at the doctor's office. His sister and youngest brother attended state universities. In 1965, two of his brothers, John and Luck, were elected mayors of their respective Delta towns, Jonestown and Sledge.

But the progress wasn't seamless. By 1959, the Wing family—my grandfather, grandmother, and their four children—had outgrown the three-room living quarters in the back of the store. My grandfather found a house for sale in a white neighborhood and reached a purchase agreement with the seller. My family was ready to move into the house until a large group from the neighborhood passed around a petition signed by residents who did not want Chinese neighbors. Not willing to risk his family's safety, my grandfather stayed put in the store. He added on to the living quarters instead.

Decades later, when my grandparents' health started to decline, my mother moved home from Chicago to help care for them and the store. In traditional Chinese culture, sons are favored to carry on the family legacy. But my uncles pursued other careers. When my grandfather died in 1979, my thirty-two-year-old single mother, whom customers called Miss Cathy, took over the business. Later that year, I was born. From the hospital in Greenwood, my mother brought me home to Webb, to the store on Main Street.

I SOMETIMES WONDER why my mother didn't move us into a house. With so much on her plate—a separation from my father, two young daughters, a mother with a heart condition, and a business to run—Wing's Grocery may have provided the comfort and stability she needed. It had been my grandmother's home for more than thirty years, my mother's childhood home, and it became mine. I grew up there with my grandmother, whom I called Poh Poh (Cantonese for maternal grandmother), my mother, and my older sister, Cindy. The long butcher case served as the northern border between the living room and the three main grocery aisles. We often referred to the store as if it were another room in our home.

When Mama closed the store at six each evening, it became my playground. Aisles one and two served as the track for tricycle races against imaginary opponents. The starting line was at the back of the store, by the paper towels and molasses, where the concrete floor of the butcher section met the wooden floorboards of the grocery aisles. On my red trike, I zoomed down the aisle, past Crisco cans and lard tubs on the left and laundry detergent boxes and bleach bottles on my right. I made a sharp left at the frozen vegetables section and dairy case, avoiding the boxes of onions and

potatoes as I rounded the corner, careful not to tip over. I peddled up the main aisle, past the ice cream case and checkout counter, past the Nabs and Wonder Bread on my left and the canned goods and condiments on my right. In the homestretch, I peddled past the dried beans and noodles, crossing the finish line by the two-liter Cokes.

Later, I graduated to roller skates, a gift from one of my uncles. When I looked at those roller skates, I saw fun and excitement—something that other American kids had. Poh Poh and Mama saw skinned knees, busted lips, and broken bones. As a compromise, Poh Poh would let me slip on one skate over one tennis shoe. With practice, I got the feel for pushing off with one foot and gliding on the other. I did not even need the shelves to help with balance.

On Sunday mornings, Mama, Cindy, and I went to the Baptist church while Poh Poh cooked a Chinese feast for us at home. The rest of the week, Mama cooked dinner after working all day in the store—dishes like meatloaf, seasoned with Lipton's Onion Soup mix and topped with dressed-up ketchup; Loretta Lynn's fried chicken (from a recipe torn from a Crisco ad in *Good Housekeeping*), and mashed potatoes from scratch. But Sunday was Poh Poh's day.

We returned home from services to a spread that changed based on her cravings and the ingredients on hand. With flat-bottom porcelain soup spoons, we slurped her variation of egg-drop soup made with creamed corn from aisle two. With our chopsticks, we picked at a whole steamed fish, catfish or perch, delicately seasoned with ginger, garlic, and scallions. If sweet-and-sour ketchup shrimp was on the menu, we lined the table with white butcher paper for easy cleanup. Some variation of pork was always part of the spread: slices of oven-roasted Chinese barbecue pork, or braised black-bean spareribs, or steamed minced pork with salt-cured egg yolks. Stir-fried vegetables like long beans grown in her garden, bok choy, mustard greens, or eggplant balanced the proteins. Steamed white rice anchored every meal. If we were lucky, she'd drop in a link or two of lap cheong to steam with the rice. Special occasions like Chinese New Year called for wontons and egg rolls, which we all helped fold, and steamed barbecue pork buns. Using the plastic spindle from a spent roll of receipt paper dipped in food coloring, she marked each with a wheel-shaped red stamp for good luck.

Although we lived in a grocery store, Poh Poh relied on my uncle in Los Angeles to stock her pantry with Chinese staples like soy sauce, dried shiitake mushrooms, oyster sauce, snow fungus, wood ear mushrooms, mung bean noodles, and jars of fermented bean curd. He threw in candy for me and Cindy. I loved the Haw Flakes, stacked and wrapped like a roll of coins. I placed one small thin, pink disc on my tongue at a time, letting it crumble into sugary, fruity pieces before tearing off more of the wrapper and eating the next one.

Cindy and I spoke English with our mother, but we thought that Poh Poh only spoke Cantonese. We learned the language to speak to her. Cindy and I are the only cousins who speak Cantonese, the village dialect, with an American accent. I listened carefully and tried my best to repeat her tones and sounds. Whenever I did not know a Chinese word for something, she'd tell me in Cantonese to just say it in English. Eventually, I realized that she understood English. After all, she worked in the store and interacted with our customers. You can't live in a country for more than half your life and not understand the language. That said, I only heard her speak English once. I

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Hin Fook "Henry" Wing, ca. 1970s; Poh Poh cooking, ca. 1980s; Wing's Grocery, 1997; Mr. and Mrs. Hong Ah Wing, ca. 1930s or 40s; Poh Poh and the author, early 1980s

was about seven years old and she answered the phone, "Daughter not home. Call back later." I was shocked and confused at the time. It was perfectly clear. Why did I have to speak to her in Cantonese if she could speak English? Why didn't she speak to me in English since we were in America? One day, I caught Poh Poh holding a plastic stencil with my school supplies near my backpack. She recited the alphabet to me, pointing at each letter. Apparently, Mama had taught her when she was in school.

I told classmates that my family owned a grocery store and that I could eat all the candy and ice cream I wanted. But I never admitted we lived there.

Sometimes I pulled up a chair and practiced my Cantonese with her, asking her questions about China. She talked with her hands and paused often for dramatic effect. She told me she hid in the mountains with my mother's oldest brother from Japanese soldiers during the Second Sino-Japanese War. They walked for days with just the clothes on their bodies and the only valuables she had, gold jewelry, hidden in the bun piled on her head. She drank collected rainwater and ate grass when there was nothing else. She survived. She told me about typhoons and boats that capsized. She felt like a heavenly spirit guided her.

Poh Poh loved to watch PBS—nature documentaries, travel shows, and most of all, cooking shows. Together we watched Jacques Pépin break down a whole chicken, Julia Child roll out pâte brisée for quiche, Justin Wilson whisk a roux for gumbo, and Martin Yan skillfully chop vegetables with a cleaver. I was always impressed with Yan's speedy techniques, but I'm not sure Poh Poh was as amused. She found his showmanship over-the-top but respected his cooking skills. If she saw a new technique or flavor combination, she'd work it into Sunday meals.

Some Sundays, my cousins would visit from Memphis. After lunch, the aunts and uncles gossiped in the living room over a sour cream pound cake or lemon meringue pie while we children played in the store. We hid behind cases of RC Cola or between stacks of brown paper grocery bags and chased each other down the aisles. We pulled stools around the checkout counter and played Monopoly, Connect Four, and Perfection. We set up a short-lived bowling alley in aisle two with two-liter Cokes as the pins. When we were older, Cindy organized elaborate treasure hunts inspired by *Supermarket Sweep*.

When I wasn't in school, I had to work, too. At first, I was the window washer. Armed with paper towels spritzed with Windex, I wiped the glass panes of the green wooden front doors, the sliding glass doors of the reach-in ice cream freezer by the checkout, and the two upright refrigerator cases. As the years passed, I became a stocker. I stamped prices on the cans of creamed corn, fruit cocktail, PET evaporated milk, and Campbell's soup, careful to let the ink dry before shelving them behind the existing cans. I was practicing first-in, first-out, years before I would learn about it in college accounting. During the summer, whole chickens arrived by the case on ice each Friday. I transferred them into individual bags while my sister weighed and priced them.

By seven, I had learned to count change, so I transitioned from bagger to checker. I started pulling Mrs. Berry's glass bottles of Coca-Cola when I saw her white Chrysler LeBaron pull into a parking spot. I could point a customer to the Blue Plate mayonnaise at the end of aisle two or the Swans Down Cake Flour on aisle three. I remembered customers' cigarette preferences by their faces. The accents run particularly thick in this part of Mississippi, so developing an ear for them was kind of like learning another language—not as foreign as the Cantonese Poh Poh spoke, but not as distinct as the English I heard on TV. Words on packaging that I read based on phonics I learned in school did not always align with what came out of customers' mouths. When Mrs. Jones asked for hog joe, I grabbed a package of pork jowl. Mr. Terry would ask for a cho cho, and Mama would ring up a chocolate-dipped ice cream bar.

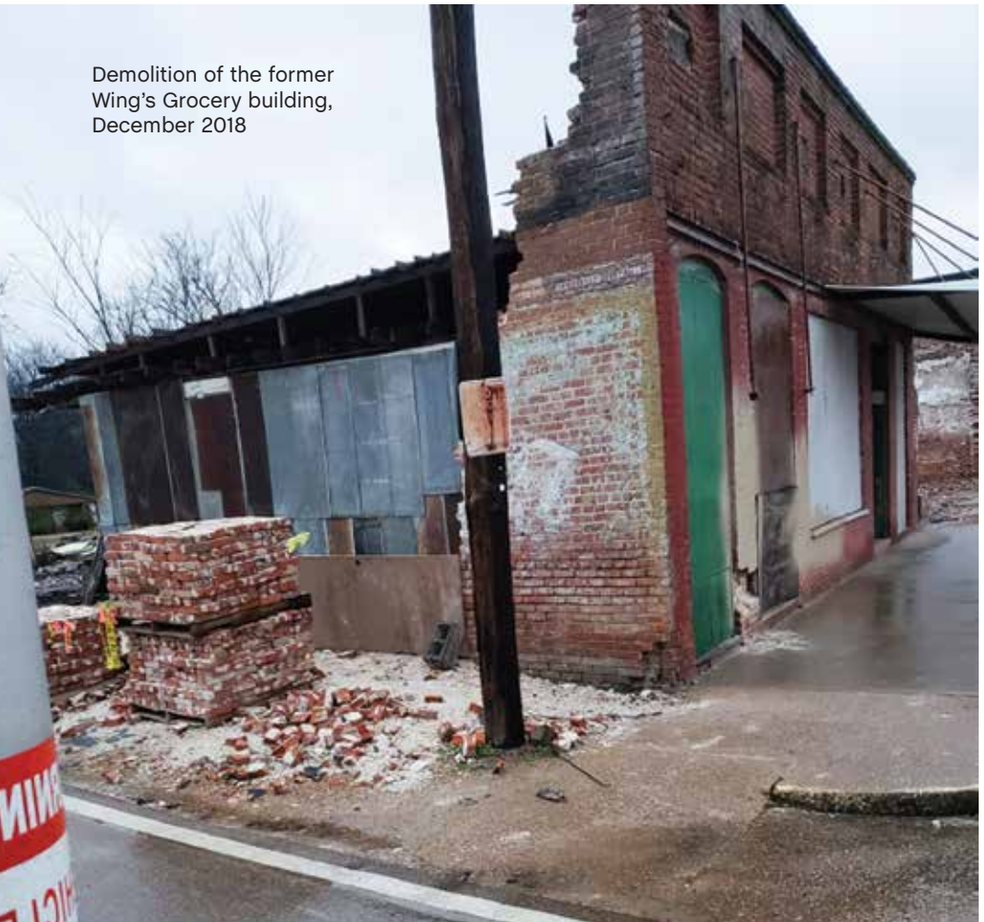
I went to a majority-white private school about thirty miles away. That's what folks did in Tallahatchie county if they could afford it. I told classmates that my family owned a grocery store and that I could eat all the candy and ice cream I wanted. But I never admitted we lived there. I shared gum and mints with the popular kids to gain their favor. Few friends knew about my living situation. I struggled with an assignment in a high school English class that asked us to create poster-board layouts of our homes and write about a memory that corresponded to each room. I completely left

Mr. and Mrs. Hin Fook Wing and family, ca. 1957

out the store as a room on my assignment. I didn't write about roller skating down the aisles after closing time. I didn't explain how I grabbed my recess snacks from the store shelves each morning before the bus came. I awkwardly pieced together what I believed was an ordinary floor plan. Embarrassment warmed my cheeks as I raised my hand when the teacher asked, "Whose house is a large rectangle?" If I told people I lived in a grocery store, they'd ask why, and I didn't want to explain. I wasn't supposed to.

I was in elementary school when my mother explained the petition to me. She told me it was something we must never talk about with others. It wouldn't be polite. I knew the family who started the petition—they bought snacks in the store, gave Christmas gifts to my sister and me, and attended our church. They owned the store next to ours. We bought my tricycle there. We were neighbors. I never reconciled their behavior.

Growing up, I wanted to be accepted as a regular American. Instead, I was often confused for a member of one the other Delta Chinese families. There were a few other Chinese American kids at my school, but we weren't closely knit like the Delta Chinese of the Jim Crow South. I often hid the fact that I could speak Cantonese. I was afraid to talk to them about being Chinese because it would make me appear less American. I never asked them if they heard the occasional "Ching, Chong" or "Chink" or "Go back to where you came from!," but I bet they did, too. These taunts usually came frequently enough to remind me that I was different. They led me to question my place in Southern society.



Demolition of the former Wing's Grocery building, December 2018

AS A CHILD, I believed living in Wing's Grocery prevented me from being a "normal" American—from taking beach vacations like my classmates or having a backyard with a swing set. Today, I am grateful for having lived in the store. It made me who I am today. It made me American.

Living in the store, I now recognize, fostered my early passion for food. It led to my culinary career, first as a professional cook and baker, and now as a recipe developer for a food technology company. Watching cooking shows with Poh Poh showed me how food serves as a common language. I credit my cooking intuition to watching her in the kitchen without measuring cups or spoons, tasting and adjusting along the way. When I went to college, she asked what I studied. I didn't know how to explain what Management Information Systems was to her, so I just pointed to my computer. She asked if a job with this degree paid well. I replied, "Yes, I will be able to take care of myself." If she were alive today, I could show her videos of my hands cooking in my company's digital cooking app, sometimes recipes inspired by her Cantonese home cooking or my mother's American comfort food. I would like to think she would approve, but also provide feedback on my recipes and technique.

Shortly after moving to California, I practiced pronouncing my name without the subtle drawl of the *a* in Mandy. If I wasn't careful, my Mississippi accent would prompt a deluge of curious, personal questions from strangers. I'm not ashamed of being Southern, but I quickly grew tired of correcting preconceived notions of the South. Yes, my family experienced racial discrimination, but we also contributed to the economy and culture of the Delta. The community supported us, not just through shopping in Wing's Grocery, but through friendship. Mr. Leroy wrote a letter to my grandfather to share his disapproval of the petition and encouraged him to continue to make Webb his home. Mr. Duward dedicated part of his garden to grow Chinese winter melon and bitter melon for Poh Poh and shared other vegetables from his harvest with us. Mr. Robert brought us pecans from his orchard. Miss Juanita gifted us homemade fudge, pecan pralines, and divinity every Christmas. Miss Sarah and Mr. Jimmy brought us souvenirs from their vacations. Miss Robinn organized a surprise birthday sleepover for my friends and me at her house, because I could never host slumber parties.

Today, I am grateful for having lived in the store. It made me who I am today. It made me American.

I was ashamed of living in that store all those years, and now it's gone. Until recently, I never thought my family history would be of interest to others. In fact, until the building was demolished, I was willing to let it remain untold. When my mother texted us the photo of the store's demolition, my sister said she felt as though we were being erased. But it doesn't have to be that way—she and I are proof that our family's legacy lives on. We will not be erased.

Mandy Morris is a culinary content manager in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Nitrus Molotov, née Luis Chevere, bloodied but smiling after a Southern Violence and Wrestling match. Athens, GA, October 24, 2020

BLOOD, SWEAT, AND RIBS

After the dropkicks, dinner together

BY ALISON MILLER

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BEN GRAY

POLO-SHIRTED CHILI'S STAFFERS BAG TRASH and sweep errant fries from beneath empty tables. Every so often, they peer past a wooden column to check the progress by the fogged windows. ¶ It's close to midnight when Axel Foley picks up an ear of chili powder–dusted corn by its skewer and holds it aloft. In perfect Jack Black-as-Nacho Libre brogue, he says, "Get that corn out of my face!" Laughter erupts.

Axel bites into a pork rib. "Who eats ribs at 11 o'clock at night?" Brian Snyder asks. "Your two-time champion!" Jamie Holmes answers. Axel snarls. "The champ eats ribs after a great match."

They've just come from "The Evil Dead," Southern Violence and Wrestling's Halloween-season show. The Athens, Georgia–based promotion, industry parlance for an organization that puts on shows, brings independent wrestlers from across the South to its monthly events at Southern Brewing Company, on the city's industrial outskirts. It's home field for Axel, SVW's reigning champion.

He's the Peyton Manning of the promotion, ferociously talented and likeable. The one who lingers after the show to high-five the kids, squatting in his striped tights so he doesn't talk down to them.

Tonight he took out his brother, Nitrus Molotov, by smashing a steel chair to his face. They aren't brothers in the biological sense, but they are partners in this brutal dance. Nitrus, née Luis Chevere, met Axel (whose real name is Alex) when they were teenagers in the south Atlanta suburbs, both sons of Puerto Rican mothers, both obsessed with professional wrestling. They hung a plastic WWF belt from a tree, laid plywood on top of stacked bricks, and took turns slamming each other through it. The first time they stepped into a real ring, it was to fight each other. They came of age during WWF's golden era and reenacted the moves they saw on TV in the backyard. When they were seventeen, they met retired wrestler Rocky King at the gym. He was recruiting talent for his new promotion and told them if they would help set up the ring at the next show, he'd train them for free. He was impressed with their self-taught skills and put them in that night. They played referees who get into a punchout over a misunderstanding in the ring.

Trust makes the action believable. To convince fans you hate somebody in the ring, it helps to love them outside of it. Moments before they caromed between the ropes, Nitrus and Axel bound their hands behind each other's necks, pressed their foreheads together, and prayed. *Lord, protect us out there. Guide us. Bless us to use this talent to entertain the fans and glorify You. Thank you, Lord, for our blessings, for letting us do what we do, for keeping us alive.* And then, to each other: *I love you, man. Love you.*

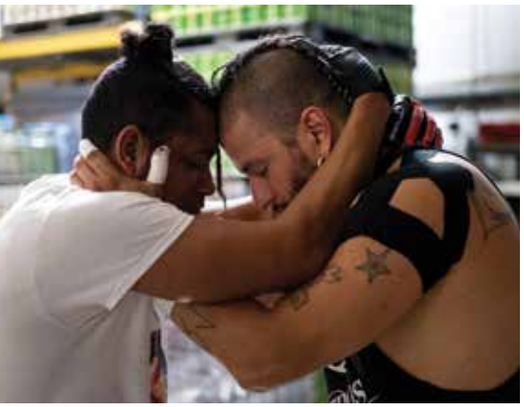
Wrestling is church for these men, and the late-night meal that follows is

Axel Rod, née Alex Foley, before suiting up for the show

A smaller-than-normal crowd due to inclement weather watches the opening match of SVW's October show, "The Evil Dead."

WRESTLING IS ABOUT MANIPULATING EMOTIONS.

THE SHOW WRITER WANTS YOU TO CHEER FOR ONE GUY AND LOB OBSCENITIES AT THE OTHER.



TOP TO BOTTOM: An exuberant Ryan Murdoch recounts his match; Axel and Nitrus pray together before facing off; SVW fans cheer despite the rain; Nitrus carries Axel across the ring during the fight.

fellowship. Tonight, a pack of wrestlers wiped the blood from their faces, peeled off their Lycra for jeans and t-shirts, and piled into cars headed for Chili's. Facing a two-hour drive home, Nitrus opted out of dinner.

In the old days, they sat together. Now they settle for two four-tops separated by an empty table—pandemic rules. Jamie Holmes, a seventeen-year-veteran of wrestling who funnels aspirants to SVW via his backyard training ring, takes one table. His thirteen-year-old son, Billy, files in next to him, along with Shane Bruce, an SVW security guard, and Brian Snyder, an announcer and backyard trainee. Axel sits at the other table with Jeremie Prater, an SVW referee they refer to by last name only, and Ryan Murdoch, the thirty-five-year-old special-education teacher who created SVW six years ago.

"I just want food," Prater says.

"What'd you eat last?" Ryan asks.

"McDonald's," he says. "No—Wendy's."

Fifteen seconds pass. He reveals that actually, the last thing he ate was barbecue nachos from the food truck parked outside the brewery.

"Gah," Ryan says. "That dude eats so much."

"I do," Prater says, and laughs. "I lose it during the week, though."

Prater cuts grass, trims bushes, and whacks weeds for a living, activities that limit the evidence of his eating habits to a slight bulge in his abdomen. He orders a six-ounce sirloin, double fries, and two sides of ranch.

Axel and Ryan, who once suffocated Axel with a grocery bag and ripped the championship belt from his hands, go in on the "Two-for-$25," a date-night dinner that includes a shared appetizer. Ryan gets a quesadilla. Axel orders a half-rack of ribs and picks the starter: fried pickles.

Tonight, in a surprise ending to the show, Axel stormed the ring and joined Jamie and Ryan in their newly formed bad-guy troupe, F.A.M.E. "Seems like a lot of people's hearts have been broken tonight," the neo-villain roared into the mic as raindrops peppered his face. He harangued the audience for booing him when he began his championship ascent. "We are not the villains in this story. You are the villains!" he screamed. It was a blow to the 120 spectators in lawn chairs around the ring, many of whom chanted his name before every match in his eighteen-month rise to the top.

The crowd hates it when a good guy goes bad. It's called a heel turn, an industry trick to boost ticket sales. When fans are angry, they show up to see what happens next. SVW co-owner Justin Legend, who writes the shows, engineered Axel's ascension and then walloped fans with his fall from grace. He did it because he knows they'll pick themselves off the floor and come back for more.

Tonight, they threw empty plastic cups and Mountain Dew bottles as Axel delivered his shameful monologue. A sad, soaked little girl, waist-high to the gray-haired woman behind her, gripped an empty Capri Sun pouch and stared in disbelief.

TOP TO BOTTOM: Wrestler Charlie Anarchy prepares for his match amid the fermentation tanks at Southern Brewing Company; Fans meet Axel and Nitrus before the show; Jamie Holmes recounts a match over a late dinner at Chili's; Young fans soak up the action.

After the show, a few dubious fans approached Axel for hugs and high-fives. He shrugged them off and returned to the locker room. They pleaded with a bartender to summon him, to no avail.

"You do that, you kill the story," Prater says, looking up from his phone. Wrestling is about manipulating emotions. The show writer wants you to cheer for one guy and lob obscenities at the other. Breaking character cracks the veneer. In the safety of a strip-mall Chili's, these wrestlers skate between their roughhouse gimmicks and their workaday selves. Around this table, away from the watchful eyes of an audience that insists on typecasts, they touch common ground.

Axel pulls fried pickles from a metal basket. "I was just teaching them the reality of life," he says, referring to his heartbroken young fans. "You get jabbed, and it hurts sometimes." When a server appears—"Y'all doing alright over here?"—his snarl wilts. "Doing great, buddy."

The server sets the drinks on the table. Ryan reaches for one of the plastic beer mugs and Prater pulls it back. "Does that look like tea?" he asks. "If your tea is that dark, you got a serious problem."

"*You* do," Ryan comes back at him like a big brother.

Prater laughs. "I don't know what it is, but the combination of sweet tea and saltines, *maaan*. I used to get a big glass of sweet tea, go into my room, and watch old wrestling. Just sit there and just eat saltines and drink tea." He shakes his head at the recollection.

Axel cradles his Samsung and responds to a post on his Facebook page. Ryan prods the reddened skin on his forearm, a grid-like brand left when another wrestler known as Chop Top smashed a galvanized steel gusset plate into him, then picks up his phone to craft a Facebook message thanking fans who stuck it out in the downpour.

Prater breaks the calm with a headline from his news feed. "Macaroni and cheese on a hot dog. I wonder if that's any good?"

Members of SVW decompress and debrief over dinner in Athens.

AROUND THIS TABLE, AWAY FROM THE WATCHFUL EYES OF AN AUDIENCE THAT INSISTS ON TYPECASTS, THEY TOUCH COMMON GROUND.

"Macaroni on a hot dog is something the school would do," Ryan says. "You should see the weird-ass combinations these kids eat, man. I'm like, *I'm sorry, I wish I could pack your lunch*."

Axel interrupts. "Ryan, you gonna eat some of these fried pickles, you little shit?"

Over the next hour, warm rain will continue to fall. Grown men will feast on quesadillas and Crispy Chicken Crispers and drain plastic steins of sweet tea and Dr Pepper. The only mention of politics comes at the end of the night, when Jamie touts an obscure puppet show wherein Donald Trump's hair sprouts feet and walks off his pate. They all laugh.

The server appears again and asks Ryan and Axel if they've decided on a dessert to share.

Ryan looks up. "Let's do the cheesecake."

The clock on the wall reads 11:55 P.M.

The server returns a few minutes later and asks which tabs are separate.

"Put everything on that card," Jamie points to Brian. "You're a teacher, you're making that big money."

Brian, who teaches middle-school English, shakes his head. "I think you need to reevaluate."

"What the hell is this? Southern Violence and Teachers?" Prater asks.

Brian's quick to the punch. "Yes. We have to get our aggression out somehow."

Only Axel's plate remains. He bites into the skewered corn.

"Let's watch the champ eat," Jamie says.

And they're off again, a pack of burly Cinderellas basking in the afterglow of the ball, clinging, just a few minutes more, to the fantastical roles they'll soon leave behind. To watch wrestlers soften their fists and belly-laugh across the table is a boisterous reminder that when we leave our gimmicks at the door and pull up a chair, we have more to rally around than fight about. It pecks at a bigger, real world question: Are we as divided as we think we are? Or does the power broker behind the curtain have something to gain by our division?

Brian goes ring announcer. "The champ eats corn, that's what the champ does."

Axel's scowl returns. "I do what I want, I'm the champ."

"I eat creamed corn, because I'm the champ," Jamie says, mocking Axel.

"Maybe we need to sit down and eat a bunch of creamed corn," Ryan says, cooking up an idea for a video to promote F.A.M.E. "We would swim in that shit."

Prater looks up from his phone. "I'm so down to swim in creamed corn."

Alison Miller is a freelance writer in Athens, Georgia, and second-year student of the Narrative Nonfiction MFA program at the University of Georgia.

THE FINE LEGACY OF *Lucille's*

In Houston, Chris Williams serves Black cuisine without limits.

by KAYLA STEWART

Lucille's Yardbird, served with braised collard greens and honey-spiced gravy; OPPOSITE: Lucille Smith with a selection of her baked goods and small bites.

It's a sweltering day in September 2020, and Chris Williams is working in his restaurant kitchen in downtown Houston. He's braising collard greens, brining and slow-frying chicken, and roasting fish from the nearby Gulf. Importantly, he's also making sure his staff and guests are kept safe during COVID-19. He welcomes longtime and new customers to outdoor tables and offers curbside pickup and delivery options. He's also constantly thinking of how to communicate who he is through his food. When Williams cooks, he tells two stories: his own, and his great-grandmother's.

Chris Williams is the chef-owner of Lucille's, a fine-dining Southern restaurant. He opened the Houston eatery in 2012 with his older brother Ben. A son of Texas with an international résumé, Williams invokes his travels—and his rich Black Texan history—in every dish he serves. Privy to the expectations of what a leading Black chef is supposed to cook, Williams deviates from what he sees as stereotypical presumptions. He tops hot dogs with kimchi, makes a mustard-laden potato salad that speaks to the Mennonites and Germans who've been in Texas for centuries, and seasons Cornish hen with the sweet and spicy berbere spice mix of Ethiopia.

Houston is one of the most international and ethnically diverse cities in the United States. Strip-mall restaurants here serve fragrant biryani, piping pho, and rich, decadent enchiladas, all an homage to the city's heavily immigrant population. There's tremendous culinary diversity, and yet Black Houston chefs, like many around the nation, are often

Archival photos courtesy of the Williams family; previous, above, and opposite: Jenn Duncan

THIS PAGE: Hot chicken sandwich at Lucille's; OPPOSITE: Chef Chris Williams hosts a dinner for the release of *Jubilee* by Toni Tipton-Martin, December 2019.

associated with one cuisine—soul food. Restaurants like Mikki's Soulfood Café have long brought comfort and joy to Houstonians through their smothered fried chicken, ham hocks, and turkey necks. Careful to appreciate the importance of soul food, Williams knows that it's not the only food Black chefs can cook.

"We're so much more than what society tells us we are," Williams says.

For generations, Black chefs have created their own narratives. At Dooky Chase in New Orleans, the late Leah Chase interpreted Creole cuisine to create a restaurant that placed Black cooking on a level of reverence that, at the time, was largely reserved for European cuisine. Her aptitude for French culinary techniques shone in dishes like shrimp Clemenceau and lobster Thermidor. Chase believed that Blackness—particularly in food—was excellence.

Williams' contemporaries, including Mashama Bailey, Edouardo Jordan, and Kwame Onwuachi, continue this legacy of preparing Black food in new and extraordinary ways. Onwuachi invoked his Nigerian roots in his brussels suya at his former restaurant Kith and Kin in Washington, DC. Jordan pays homage to his family history through Momma Jordan's braised oxtails alongside chanterelle mushrooms and roasted autumn vegetables at Junebaby in Seattle. At The Grey in Savannah, Bailey offers dishes like roasted beef shanks and biscuits with country ham, red eye gravy, and a poached egg. Like many modern Black chefs, they proudly bring their ethnic origins into their kitchens, but they refuse to remain bound to whitewashed ideas of what Black cooking should be.

In her 2019 book, *Jubilee: Recipes from Two Centuries of African American Cooking*, Toni Tipton-Martin traces the history of Black American cuisine. "Once these people are freed from the constraints of stereotypes, then we're all free, too, free to explore our own identities through their accomplishments, and to see what African American food identity really is," Tipton-Martin says.

Williams builds his restaurant's identity through the environments that have influenced him, from his travels abroad to his cosmopolitan hometown. "Houston's known for its diversity. It's a little bit of everything, which made it right for us to come in and do what we do," he says. "There were no rules here. You can have the freedom to do whatever you want to do, as long as it's good."

Freedom when you're Black, however, often comes with constraints. The expectation for Black chefs in the United States is to serve inexpensive food without requiring more openness from guests—or demanding innovation from themselves. "Historically, Black cookeries are associated with servitude. People don't really appreciate the creativeness that goes into that ingenuity," Williams says. As he sees it, "American culinary truths are African American." From those hands, much was borrowed, too often without proper attribution.

Williams comes from a long line of Black cooks and chefs. His great-grandmother, Lucille Elizabeth Bishop Smith, namesake of his restaurant, is his biggest inspiration. Nearly a century ago, she broke the mold of what Black cooking—and Black personhood—could be.

LUCILLE SMITH WAS BORN IN THE late 1800s in deeply segregated Crockett, Texas. Early on, her great-grandson says, Smith showed a bold disregard for boundaries of gender and race. She attended several state colleges, including the historically Black university Prairie View A&M College, and became the first in her family to receive a college degree. She married Ulysses Samuel Smith, with whom she had three children: two sons, and a daughter, who was Williams' grandmother.

Smith and her husband made a home in Fort Worth. She worked as a seamstress and began cooking for private clients around the country, Williams says. In the early 1900s, just 6 percent of married women in the United States worked outside the home, usually because their husband was unemployed. Smith wasn't a traditional woman. She worked in the Fort Worth Public School District in a vocational education program that trained Black youth for domestic service jobs. Cooking was her passion. At home, Smith experimented in the kitchen—toying with French cuisine, for which she had a penchant, and building her private client base.

One of those clients hired Smith to run the dining program at Camp Waldemar, a tony summer camp for white girls near Kerrville, Texas. Smith found solace in the job, as she was able to cook for large groups and continue perfecting her techniques and recipes. She was known to prepare individual souffles for 160 campers at a single meal. With help from Ulysses, a pitmaster who'd become known as "the Barbecue King of the Southwest," Smith managed the institution for forty years, hiring a network of extended family and friends.

"It was a family tradition for everybody who was in the family and who were friends of the family and my grandparents,"

Lucille Smith serves hot rolls to the champion boxer Joe Louis, a customer and friend.

Williams says. "They were best friends—my mom and dad's moms—so everybody had to go work with Lucille over at Camp Waldemar."

In the off-season, when camp was closed, Smith wanted to pursue her own business interests. At that time, however, most married women weren't allowed to manage their own finances without a sign-off from their husband. Williams believes his great-grandmother was one of the first women in Texas to file "feme sole" (which translates as "a woman alone") for business purposes.

"That's how fearless and courageous she was," Williams says. Despite the "divorce" on paper, the two chefs remained together. Smith took her talents to her former university, Prairie View A&M, and created a Commercial Foods and Technology Department which included an apprentice training program, the first of its kind at the college level.

In 1941, Smith wrote her first cookbook, which was published as a boxed set of recipe cards called *Lucille's Treasure Chest of Fine Foods*. That collection, which recently sold at a rare-book auction for more than $1,500, includes a range meals and sides, such as hushpuppies, spoon bread, potato fudge, and hominy casserole.

"She demonstrated proficiency in creating recipes that prioritized variety, and were easy and enjoyable, [and] that put an emphasis on seasonality," Tipton-Martin says. "She captured all of those aspects of cooking that were quantified in home economics for the home consumer."

In the mid-1940s, Smith invented an All-Purpose Hot Roll Mix for a fundraiser at St. Andrews United Methodist Church of Fort Worth. Rolls made from her mix were served to passengers on American Airlines flights and at the tables of Martin Luther King Jr., Joe Louis, and President Lyndon B. Johnson. It became one of the first marketed hot roll mixes in the nation and, according to Williams, was likely an uncredited inspiration for Pillsbury hot roll mix.

Like many Black culinary innovators of her generation—such as the chef whose recipe inspired Bisquick in the early twentieth century, and whose name has been lost to history—Smith and other prominent Black chefs were rarely credited or compensated for their creations. Blackness became an asset when a white person or brand capitalized on it. That is a painful legacy and remnant of America's centuries-old inability to properly recognize and compensate Black Americans for their talent. This injustice, more than any other, influences Williams. "Her spirit was ingrained in us because we're all entrepreneurs and we're following her footsteps."

Generations of the family took up the cooking baton. Williams' father, Connie B. Williams, a criminal defense attorney, was also the cook of the household. When Chris was younger, Connie would recreate their favorite restaurant dishes at home. Chris also cooked with his father's mother, whom he called "Mama Joe." Snapping peas and tearing collard greens, he waited for his favorite dish—Chinese cabbage, bathed in lard. "I've

ABOVE: Ulysses and Lucille Smith
OPPOSITE: Lucille Smith demonstrates her Hot Roll Mix at a Fort Worth grocery store, one of many that carried her product.

AS WILLIAMS SEES IT,

"American culinary truths are African American."

FROM THOSE HANDS, MUCH WAS BORROWED, TOO OFTEN WITHOUT PROPER ATTRIBUTION.

The dining room at
Lucille's, February 2020

been chasing that flavor my entire life, but I can never reproduce it. There's just not enough pig fat in the world," Williams says, laughing.

Williams was six when his great-grandmother passed, but her legacy remained ingrained in the family, and her great-grandson has moved it forward.

"His work embodies all of the dimensions of her legacy of using food as a mechanism for social change," Tipton-Martin says of Williams' career. "She was an entrepreneur, and she expressed her intentional desire to empower others. She gave back to her community; she gave back to the broader community. She inspired people to pursue careers within food, but not those that had been narrowly defined to restaurant cooking or soul cooking. She was a nutritionist, she was a restaurateur, she has the same entrepreneurial stretch as a manufacturer. What she does is embody culinary freedom by encouraging us to be whatever it is that we want to be. And [Williams] is the beneficiary of seeing that up close."

Williams' professional cooking journey began at Le Cordon Bleu in Austin, followed by jobs in Lithuania, Southern France, Canada, Germany, London, and Washington, D.C.

But something was missing. "I did not want to live this peripatetic lifestyle," said Williams. "I didn't know what I was doing, because I had no recipes. I had no

Lucille Smith with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Previous: Jenn Duncan

culinary perspective; I was just this gun for hire." With a new baby on the way, he moved back home to Houston with his then-wife.

In 2012, Williams and brother Ben opened Lucille's in the center of Houston's Museum District. In 2019, Ben opened The Highway Distillery, Houston's first Black-owned distillery, which makes hemp vodka. Though he left his role as co-owner of Lucille's in 2014, his grandmother's legacy still influences his work as a Black business owner.

Ben says, "She's the reason why I believe I can do whatever I want." Ben's business extends his family's longstanding legacy of entrepreneurship and innovation.

So does Chris' restaurant. Serving his great-grandmother's famous chili biscuits, he oscillates between the food he grew to love during his travels and the Southern cooking traditions that defined his childhood. He tops his great-grandmother's subtly sweet biscuits with American cheese and a dollop of hearty chili. They've never left the menu.

His roasted Cornish hen is an ode to his love of Ethiopian food. He rubs the birds with lemon juice, roasted garlic, olive oil, and berbere, a spice blend with sweet notes that packs a citrusy heat. The next day, he pan-sears the hens before finishing them in the oven. He serves each one on a bed of Carolina Gold rice grits cooked with Gruyère cheese. He pairs the meal with brown-butter sweet peas, inspired by his father's mustard-battered fried chicken with mashed potatoes and peas. His pork and beans stuns guests; rather than a saccharine bowl of beans that often accompanies barbecue, Williams presents a bone-in pork chop that sits atop a three-bean ragout, creamed collard green kimchi, and a tomato-onion-herb salad inspired by his father.

The 1923 Mission-style home that Lucille's now occupies is modern and airy inside. Guests dine as portraits of legendary Black chefs and visionaries, including, of course, Lucille, look down on them. A massive window overlooks the oak and elm trees of the Museum District. As they dine, guests of all races can consider a side of Blackness not often highlighted during this turbulent moment in history: one of freedom, of joy, and of personal identity.

Remnants of his time boiling potatoes in Canada can be found in his tuna classic salad with fingerling potatoes. His grilled octopus pulls from his cooking experience in southern France. The green coconut curry is a holdover from Chris and Ben's previous venture, a Caribbean restaurant that shuttered in the early 2000s. His stewed okra and tomatoes is a proud ode to his Black heritage.

"I am very proud about the Blackness of my family history, but I also want to be very welcoming to everybody," he says.

Williams' departure from the status quo has drawn accolades and critiques. One white food writer was particularly brazen in his criticism, suggesting Williams stay in his lane and cook "what his grandmother cooked."

"About a year in, he tells me that everyone's rooting for me," Williams remembers. Williams thanked him, and then the writer gave him a cookbook by an African American chef. "He said, 'We think you need to get back to what your grandmother was doing.' And I said, 'You mean my great-grandmother?' He says, 'Yeah!' And I said, 'So what was she doing?'"

The writer, a respected Southern food journalist, stumbled over his words and continued offering unsolicited input. He pointed Williams to a chef he should emulate—a chef who predominantly cooks soul food. Williams shut him down.

"I *am* doing what my great-grandmother

did, because she was being true to her own creativity. She wasn't limited to what your expectation was."

Some Black customers have come in with their own assumptions of what Black food should be, too; they weren't initially receptive to the nuances of Williams' menu and the fine-dining price tag that came with the plate.

"I would get comments like, 'This restaurant should be for everybody.' And I'm like, 'What do you mean? It is for everybody.'"

Another Black customer, especially pleased with a sous vide halibut over carrot butter with a raw fennel salad and salsa verde, told Chris that she'd shared how great this "soul food" was with her friends. Williams asked her what made the dish soul food.

"She didn't have the answer, but I knew the answer: *Did your Black-ass hands make it? Then it's soul food.*"

Williams links this constant dance between expectations to the origins of Black cooking in the United States. The role of Black chefs began in the kitchen of white slaveholders. Despite their creativity, Black cooks were relegated to servitude, and to one narrow pathway for what kind of food they could cook for other people.

"I knew that the expectation was that Black chef plus Black restaurant equals soul food. I knew that as limiting as it is, it was also an opportunity to break the narrative that people have created for me," Williams says.

His narrative-breaking mission resonates beyond Houston. In 2018, he served as the cultural-culinary ambassador for a tour of the Balkans organized by the U.S. embassies in Slovakia and Slovenia.

More important, however, is how Black Houstonians have grown to respect and treasure Lucille's, both for its history and as a demonstration of modern Black excellence. Williams says that Black diners are driving business to Lucille's, both through weekly patronage and sending friends and family along for celebrations and major events.

"You can see the pride they have in taking ownership that this is a Black-owned business. This is yours. This is your voice."

In spite of his successes, Williams' work has sometimes been overlooked. Mainstream food media tends to focus on Houston's Tex-Mex, Southeast Asian, and white American restaurants and their chefs, to the exclusion of Lucille's. This reality isn't specific to Houston—the disregard for Black chefs has been a ubiquitous habit in American dining, sparking an outcry over how restaurants and chefs are covered as well as calls for change of who gets to decide what constitutes culinary excellence.

This underappreciation is slowly dissolving. The forty-two-year-old chef's restaurant reached the ears of the 2020 presidential campaign. When then-candidate Joe Biden came to Houston to meet George Floyd's family amid ongoing racial justice protests, he chose Lucille's as the meeting place.

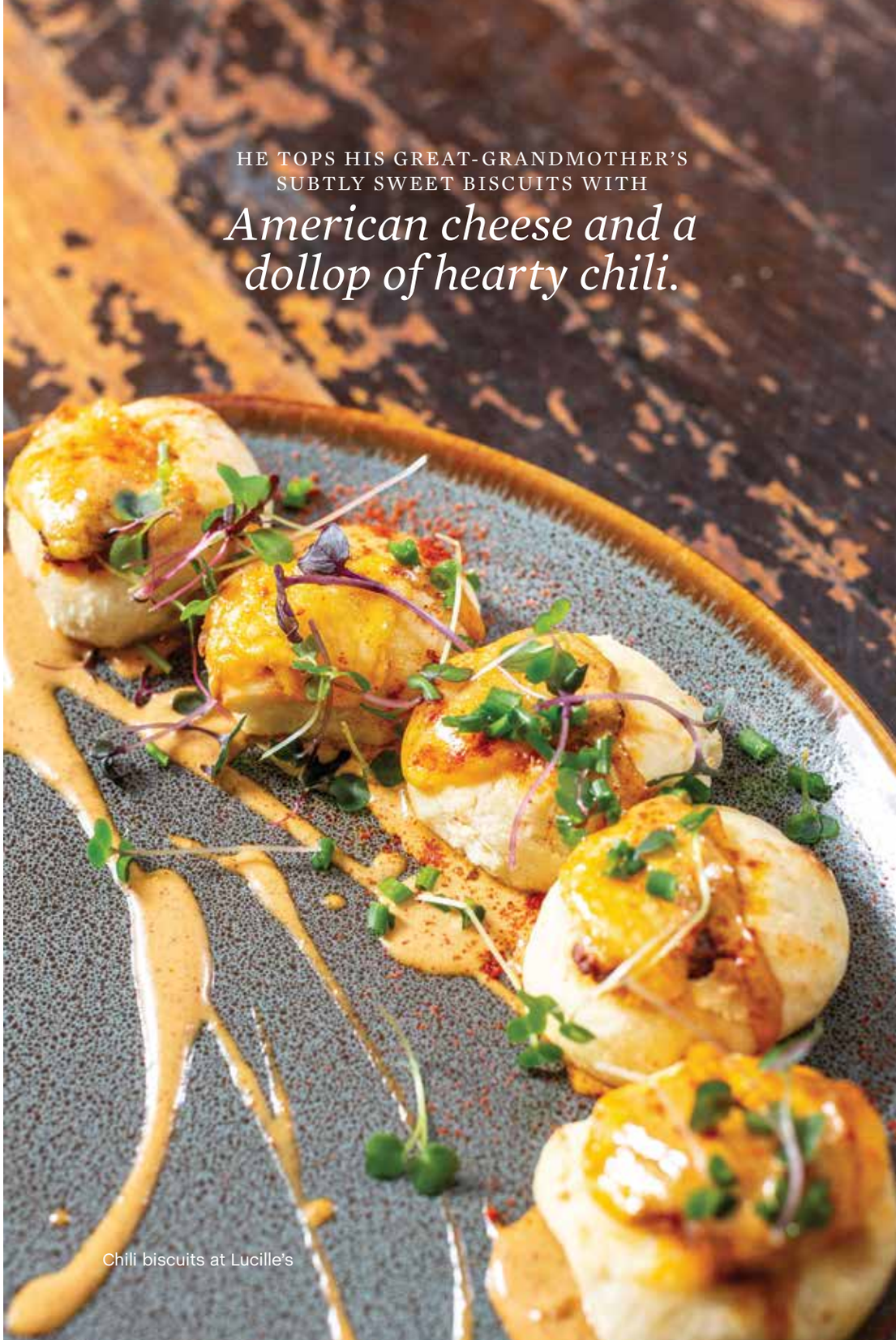
Williams was struck by the opportunity to offer a space to the Floyd family and to meet Biden. Members of the Floyd family, Williams says, were grateful to have their voices heard by the candidate, and to converse with him in a place like Lucille's. Watching them enter his restaurant was a sobering moment for Williams.

"The Floyd family comes in, and that's what made it real. George Floyd is a movement. He's a father, son, brother, uncle. And his family came, and they're hurting. They don't want this publicity."

Lucille's was closed to the public that day. Over lunch, Biden listened to members of the Floyd family express

HE TOPS HIS GREAT-GRANDMOTHER'S SUBTLY SWEET BISCUITS WITH

American cheese and a dollop of hearty chili.



Jenn Duncan

Chili biscuits at Lucille's

Chris Williams (left) and family members with Dr. Jill Biden and President-Elect (then candidate) Joe Biden, June 2020.

grief and frustration, and he tried to offer comfort, Williams recalls.

Biden also spoke to Williams and his staff. Offering Williams a Challenge Coin—usually reserved for war heroes or people who've shown extreme acts of valor—Biden told him, "I believe in what you're doing, keep doing it, this is for you," Williams said of the meeting. Hosting Floyd's family and meeting Biden was one of the highlights of Williams' career, he says. It reminded him of the ongoing legacy of Black restaurants serving as community spaces.

"I've never aimed to be or considered my space to be a place for activism, but it's just in our DNA to act, and to be active in addressing the challenges our communities face." Reflecting on the role of Dooky Chase during the Civil Rights movement, the Black Lives Matter movement, and COVID-19 have spurred an increased sense of responsibility at Lucille's, and Williams is eager to make Lucille's an essential institution for progress in the Houston community.

For Williams, creating his own path and helping others on the way is simply the way of the family. His great-grandmother built a career on generosity, innovation, and service—but not servitude. For so many in Houston, the restaurant that carries her name does just that.

"If someone tells me that the food reminds them of some great experience back in the day from their mom's cooking, or some time when the sun shone brighter and the air was great, I know that I'm doing the right thing."

Kayla Stewart is a freelance writer based in Harlem, with roots in Houston, Texas. She received her MA in international relations and journalism from New York University.

Paul Morse

FIELDWORK, MINUS THE FIELD

Dispatches from an oral historian's couch

BY ANNEMARIE ANDERSON

IN THE FIRST TWO MONTHS OF 2020, I drove back and forth from Oxford to Birmingham, Alabama. I traipsed in and out of restaurants with Michelle Little, a Birmingham-based oral historian who was collaborating with me on our multicity Career Servers project. Maskless, we drove around in each other's cars, ate lunch together at restaurants, and scouted interviews. As I traversed I-22, I listened as NPR's Beijing correspondent Emily Feng reported on a virus devastating a nation halfway across the world. Birmingham felt beyond such sorrow. 2020 was shaping up to be the most productive year for oral history since I joined SFA as oral historian in 2018.

On the morning of March 4, I sat in the dining room of Milo's Hamburgers in Jasper, Alabama. I was there to interview Ms. Brenda O'Neill, a longtime employee and manager at Milo's. She talked about the joy of leading a team of employees, teaching and conducting administrative work that allows the restaurant to operate smoothly. Ms. Brenda loved her customers, she told me, and she loved guiding and helping her employees to develop their skills.

After the interview, I sat in an aluminum chair across from Ms. Brenda and plied her with questions about what it takes to manage a team effectively. I could tell that she was good at her work, and it was largely because she cared about the people around her. I wanted to soak up some of her knowledge.

I, too, manage people. It's a big part of my responsibilities at SFA. I make sure oral history projects are finished, processed, and publicly accessible in a timely manner. When a collaborator has a problem or a need, I'm the one responsible for resolving it. When I got in my car to head back to Oxford, I didn't know that Ms. Brenda's interview would be the

last in-person oral history that I would conduct in 2020.

Two weeks later, we were sheltered in place, stuck there for the foreseeable future. I resisted the urge to stockpile gallons of water and reminded myself that the power would not go out. I grew up in Florida. Hurricanes were the only major disasters I knew.

I hunkered down at home, processing oral histories and stitching together audio files and images. I had to scrap our summer fieldwork plans. Instead, I combed through our archives on the hard drive I had toted home from my office in Barnard Observatory. I sat at my kitchen table and listened to the voices of oral history narrators. Chinese American grocers remembered growing up in the Mississippi Delta. Crawfish brokers shared the intricacies of the trade in South Louisiana. Comfortably ensconced on my couch, I itched to get back on the road.

In late May, a group of five collaborators and I began documenting the experiences of people whose labor intersects with foodways in the midst of COVID-19. How do you document personal tragedy wrought by a pandemic? How do you help others do this work when collaborators are scattered across the region? I needed Ms. Brenda's example more than ever.

By June, our collaborators began interviewing narrators on Zoom. We learned new technology and new ways of connecting with people. We've interviewed thirty people about the ways in which the coronavirus has impacted their lives. Narrators' work and lives have been turned upside down. Restaurant workers have lost their jobs. Restaurant owners have closed and reopened their restaurants with the ebb and flow of local infection rates. Farmers think about the best way to socially distance while tending their land. Mutual-aid groups feed restaurant workers and community members facing unemployment in the wake of a pandemic, during a summer of protests calling for a more equitable nation.

A virus has stripped away our ability to connect in person. My job is contingent upon spending time with people, looking them in the face and listening to what they have to say. I feel lost connecting over a screen. I mourn the missed opportunity of sitting at a table with an oral history collaborator to talk over coffee. I grieve my inability to offer a tissue or wrap a person in a hug after they've shared a difficult story. I long for the day when I will be able to shake someone's hand without the looming possibility of infection.

This is gentle work. I often tell people who are interested in oral history that this work is fundamentally inefficient. There is no personal authority or workflow or magic chant to convince someone to open up to you about her life. There are no boxes to check off a list. You've just got to care about people and listen to them. I've made reservations to sit at a specific waiter's table in order to convince him to be interviewed. I've eaten coffee cake with retired food writers in their homes. I've woken at the crack of dawn to spend hours watching sorghum farmers make syrup. To get the interview, you have to put in the time. Oral history narrators teach me patience and compassion every time I do fieldwork.

One day, I will get in my orange Volkswagen and drive east on I-22. I will get off on exit 56 and take Highway 78 into Jasper. I will turn right into the Milo's parking lot, but it will not be for the usual excuse of hot crinkle fries and a large sweet tea. I hope, this time, I will be able to see Ms. Brenda again.

Annemarie Anderson is SFA's oral historian.

Brenda O'Neill, photographed at Milo's in Jasper, Alabama, November 2020

Lynsey Weatherspoon

LAST COURSE

On the (Barbecue) Trail

WHEN THEN-SENATOR KAMALA HARRIS ANNOUNCED that she was running for President in early 2019, the first stop on her campaign tour was Rodney Scott's BBQ in Charleston, SC. Scott welcomed her with his signature positivity and declaration that "Every Day is a Good Day." She drank iced tea and ate pulled pork and collards with cornbread. Scott and Harris laughed together and she listened as he talked about his journey to opening his restaurants. It was a thrill to be there and document her visit.

—ANGIE MOSIER, *photographer*

SFA GRAVY

Gravy is a publication of the Southern Foodways Alliance, an institute of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi.

The SFA documents, studies, and explores the diverse food cultures of the changing American South.

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