Smiling, he would slowly pour the sour pale-yellow liquid into our tallest glass
then pinch golden chunks of the still-oven-warm wedges into it until brimming.
- From the poem "Cornbread in Buttermilk," by Michael McFee, featured in Cornbread Nation 4.

NUMBER 29, SUMMER 2008 **NEWS FROM THE SOUTHERN FOODWAYS ALLIANCE**

From the President: Why We Study Food

by Marcie Cohen Ferris, *University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*

As a scholar of food, I often find myself defending why it is important to study food. In spite of front page news and Internet stories that deal with international food shortages, genetically modified crops, and food scares like the recent tomato crisis, the study of food is still viewed with some skepticism in the academy.

How does the study of food contribute to the quest for greater knowledge within the academy? What new theories or analytical interpretations can be gained from the study of food? Food provides a more nuanced reading of the texture of daily life in the past, but is that *all* there is? I call these the "so what?" questions.

Because my academic home is the field of American Studies, my answer to this question lies in the relationship between food and the construction of regional and national identity, which has much to do with the concept of difference. How can we understand our own experience without contrasting it to the experience of others? Boundaries are critical to identity formation.

As an imagined community of Southerners, whether at an SFA symposium or at home, we define who we are, in part, by the foods we eat and those we don't. (*Food and Cultural Studies*, 2004: 81) By studying five major cultural processes associated with food—production, regulation, representation, identity, and consumption—we can better understand our historical experience as Americans and as Southerners. (*Food and Cultural Studies,* 2004: VI*)* Food reflects both our national and regional culture as surely as do the fields of art, folklore, geography, history, literature, music, politics, and religion.

The problem with the study of food—and the challenge for the Southern Foodways Alliance—is food itself. If only food were more arcane, less accessible, less *popular,* not so sensual or comforting, even divisive, its study would surely find a place in the hallowed halls of the academy. I keep my fingers crossed that one day soon we will establish a named professorship in Southern foodways at the University of Mississippi—a critical step in the evolution of the Southern Foodways Alliance.

The "so what?" question is the wrong question. The real question is about the "small things forgotten," the detail, the texture of everyday life—pigs smoked, oysters shucked, tamales shaped, cakes baked, cocktails imbibed, the *foods shared at a common table*—tell us about who we are, where we come from, and where we're going. (James Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten: The Archeology of Early American Life*, 1977).

My family suffered a terrible loss this year—the death of my dear brother-in-law, Grey Ferris, who died in the early summer after a long fight with cancer. We went back to my husband Bill's home in Vicksburg, Mississippi, to be with family and to attend Grey's funeral.

As family and friends gathered, food arrived in an elaborate display of community organization and love. Emily Compton and her daughter, Danny, brought homemade Vicksburg tomato sandwiches, stuffed eggs, tomato aspic, and a beautiful congealed salad of brandied peaches and ginger that glistened like amber. Each night, Bobby Ferguson, a talented carpenter and friend of the family, came by with a casserole prepared by his wife, Elaine, who told us, "I just made what my family loves."

There were stiff drinks of bourbon enjoyed with cheese straws, platters of fried chicken and pulled pork, and delicacies brought from New Orleans by Grey's mother-in-law, Mittie Terral, whose weekly visits from Louisiana revived the family with her gumbos and étouffée. Dr. Eddie Lipscomb, a veterinarian from nearby Port Gibson, brought a pecan-

continued on page 3 ▸

SAVE THE DATE

AUGUST 22:
Potlikker Oxford, sponsored by Jack Daniel's Tennessee Whiskey, in collaboration with the Oxford Film Festival. Featuring catfish on the plate and muscadines on the screen.

SEPTEMBER 10
Inaugural Viking Range Lecture, University of Mississippi, featuring Bich Nguyen (*Stealing Buddha's Dinner*) and Monique Truong (*Book of Salt.*)

OCTOBER 22-23
Delta Divertissement, Greenwood, Mississippi

OCTOBER 23-26
Eleventh Southern Foodways Symposium, Oxford, Mississippi–*Note from the SFA staff: While this year's symposium theme is drink, we will focus on soft drinks as well as hard drinks, on beverages like buttermilk and water and colas, too.*

JANUARY 9-11
Blackberry Farm Taste of the South SFA Benefit and gathering of the Fellowship of Southern Farmers, Artisans and Chefs

GRAVY

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Meet Greg Best: Atlanta's Master Mixologist

by Ashley Hall

I've always thought the term "mixologist" was a bit unfortunate. When I first heard it, the label rang sort of sophomoric, like someone trying hard to gussy up "bartender" into the ranks of PhDs. Now, I think the term is unfortunate because it can distract the likes of me from understanding what a mixologist actually is. A bartender is more like a line cook; a mixologist is a beverage chef.

For a bona fide introduction to mixology, open a tab at Holeman and Finch Public House in Atlanta and introduce yourself to co-owner Greg Best. Part mad scientist, part recipe archivist, Greg has created quite a stir.

Holeman and Finch is a public house with unfussy, honest food, a cool, affordable wine list, and cocktails that become the conversation piece. Try the Dastardly Deed, made of vodka, lime, opal basil, and cane syrup. Or a Blue Moon, a blend of gin, Crème de Violette, and lemon juice.

Most nights you'll find Greg behind his tidy, dramatically lit bar, keenly focused, moving deliberately, though he is quick with a smile and quite the salesman. His palate is sharp, as is his encyclopedic knowledge of liquors and classic recipes. And if you really want to see what's what, let him pair your food with a cocktail.

A native of Poughkeepsie, New York, trained in New Orleans and Las Vegas, Greg first raised eyebrows while manning the cubbyhole bar at Restaurant Eugene. There, he crafted inventive drinks such as the "Tony Talks!" (Pernod, sparkling Riesling, fresh grapefruit, and Peychaud bitters) and by perfecting classic ones, like his personal favorite, the Sazerac.

But mixology, as I discovered, is not just about recipes. Like most good cooking, it's also about ingredients. Holeman and Finch makes two kinds of bitters in-house, and six hand-crafted tinctures, with flavors like lavender, cardamom, and spearmint. Greg uses these in small doses to give his cocktails *complexity*. "People rarely even know they're there," Greg explains.

Higher-ups in the downtown Coca-Cola headquarters, inspired by such attention to detail,have partnered with the gastro-pub to remind the public about Coke's traditional side. They call it the "Perfect Pour." When a diner orders a Coke at Holeman and Finch, they literally receive it on a silver platter. They get a chilled, bell-shaped glass, choice of ice (cubed, hand-crushed, or none at all), fruit, or homemade syrup. On the harder side, there's the Southern Cola, made with Coca-Cola, Amaro, and frozen lime.

When it's all said and done, I'm not sure what word we could use instead of "mixologist" to give the job its deserved *gravitas*. Or we could just get over ourselves, pull up a stool, and let the man work. (Greg will be working at the next symposium, mixing and pouring peanut-inspired potations.)

▸ *continued from page 1*

smoked brisket he had lovingly prepared for the family. There were strawberry cakes, blueberry pound cakes, caramel cakes, and double fudge brownies baked by Mary Bell Gibbs—whose mother was famous for her brownies, too.

While we attended Grey's funeral in town, Story Stamm Ebersole, a talented Vicksburg caterer, laid out supper for the family—platters of Mrs. Compton's tomato sandwiches and big bowls of chicken salad. Food never tasted as good as at that meal. We ate and drank in small groups and later gathered in a large circle around Grey's mother, telling family stories until late in the night. If ever there was an answer to the "so what?" of why we study food, the answer lay in the food served that week and how it poignantly expressed Southern community, memory, and tradition.

My term as president of the SFA board will end at the fall symposium, and I am honored to turn the gavel over to Angie Mosier, who brings great passion, vision, and creativity to the organization. For their dedication and tireless efforts on our behalf, I want to express my gratitude to SFA staff—John T Edge, Amy Evans, Melissa Hall, Mary Beth Lasseter, and Joe York; to the staff at the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi—Ann Abadie, Mary Hartwell Howorth, Ted Ownby, Charles Wilson; as well as to Gloria Kellum, Vice Chancellor for University Relations.

The SFA has grown dramatically in the last two years, and our talented board of directors has devoted untold hours to strengthening our institution. Lastly, I want to thank the members of the SFA. I feel especially privileged to have worked with each of you over the past two years as your president.

Mary Beth Lasseter Reports from SFA's Vicksburg Office

Since mid-December, my daily routine with the SFA has changed. I still answer the e-mails that arrive every day, connecting news reporters with our member experts, inviting newbies to the SFA rolls, and forwarding the occasional pickle question straight to John T. But these days, I do all this SFA work—appropriately—from my dining room table.

After I married last August, the SFA and I struck a deal: I'd stay in Oxford to see through the annual October symposium, and then I'd relocate in December to finally live with my husband. These days, while Ned works with the Coastal Hydraulics Lab of the Army Corps of Engineers, I spread the gospel of Southern food from the SFA's first-ever field office in Vicksburg, Mississippi.

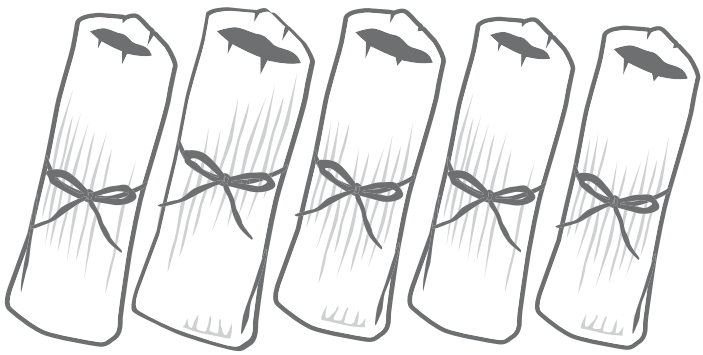
There are a number of good connections between this town and the SFA. Vicksburg is home to the Southern Cultural Heritage Foundation, an organization founded with the help of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture in Oxford. Currently, the SCHF is host to the SFA's traveling photography exhibit, *Meet the Folks Behind the Food: the SFA Oral History Initiative at Year Three*. Conveniently, I was able to deliver the photographs on one of my twice monthly Oxford commutes.

Vicksburg also has a hot tamale tradition, documented by our oral historian, Amy Evans, and featured on the SFA's Tamale Trail. And, importantly, the place is home to L.D.'s Kitchen, a soul food joint that serves the best macaroni and cheese I've ever tasted. (Note: L stands for Larry, but the D remains a mystery to most locals.) Vicksburg has proven a good fit for our first field office.

I had great visions of excess spare time before I moved, thinking—rather absurdly, I now realize—that an office away from the telephones would free up my schedule. I've quickly filled that spare time with new projects. With the urgency of phone calls removed, SFA has been able to devote my time to longer-term initiatives, like the Web site revision (coming soon) and the plans for a new membership database (to replace the overtaxed system we now use). We even wrote and received a $20,000 grant to support our oral history initiative.

Another SFA-inspired mission has also filled my personal time: the Vicksburg Farmers' Market. Encouraged by fellow SFA member Anne Freeze, who recently helped jump-start a market in her new home of Columbus, Mississippi, I've worked with a small cadre of friends to organize a farmers' market in downtown Vicksburg. Our early efforts were met with the usual skepticism brought to newcomer stirrings, but if you visit Vicksburg this summer, you'll see the naysayers shopping for squash with the rest of us. Our market hosts over 25 vendors and welcomes an average 600-800 shoppers each weekend. We sell ripe red tomatoes from local farmer Bill Freeman, sweet and juicy Smith County watermelons, and even coffee from the local coffee shop/folk art studio, Highway 61.

If ever you're in Vicksburg, drop me an e-mail at the usual spot: sfamail@olemiss.edu. You'll find me at the farmers' market on Saturday mornings, but with a visit on a weekday I'll show you around SFA's newest field office and, conveniently, we can also have lunch there.



Expansion of the SFA's Oral History Initiative

by Amy Evans

Last year we began working with writer and SFA board member Sara Roahen to collect more of the stories behind the South's food. Sara spent weeks in Louisiana, talking up cooks and meat market owners in an effort to add more oral histories to our Gumbo and Boudin Trails. This year she's back in the field—and back home in New Orleans—adding even more content to these two Louisiana culinary trails. By the spring of 2009 we hope to double the number of interviews for each project, making these two iconic Louisiana foods some of the most thoroughly documented culinary traditions in our archive.

Another colleague in the field is writer and SFA member Francis Lam. Francis splits his time between New York City and Ocean Springs, Mississippi, so we invited him to collect oral histories related to ethnicity in the seafood industry on the Gulf Coast. When last we spoke to Francis, he was on his way to interview an 87-year-old Croatian ex-shrimper named Corky.

SFA member Rien Fertel, who will be attending Tulane as a history PhD candidate in the fall, spent the summer in Tennessee, revisiting the barbecue joints that are part of our Memphis and Rural Tennessee Barbecue oral history projects. Those projects, which were conducted back in 2002 and 2003, respectively, were our first documentary efforts.

Since we were new to this thing called oral history, the stories were short and the projects thin. Rien followed up in the field with the folks we interviewed years ago, and he already has much to report: one place has burned, others are closed, and the whole hog tradition in rural Tennessee is dying. But some of the places we documented six years ago are still going strong, albeit under new ownership: Bobby's Bar-B-Que is now Siler's Old Time BBQ in Henderson, Tennessee.

Look for these interviews and more to be added to our online archive in the coming months. Meantime, visit www.southernfoodways.com to hear more of the stories behind the food.

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