

VINEGAR & CHAR

Verse from the Southern Foodways Alliance

Edited by Sandra Beasley
 Welcome by John T. Edge
 Foreword by W. Ralph Eubanks
 Illustrated by Julie Sola

“This collection of words about food is also a collection of tools—of useful things for making meaning of our lives and the world and the place we call home. It’s full of what people need.”

– Francis Lam, host of *The Splendid Table*

SOUTHERN FOODWAYS ALLIANCE STUDIES IN CULTURE, PEOPLE, AND PLACE



CREOLE ITALIAN

Sicilian Immigrants and the Shaping of New Orleans Food Culture

Justin A. Nystrom

“Makes a substantial contribution to food studies and immigration history by providing specificity and detail to broader histories of immigrant-run businesses . . .”

– Krishnendu Ray, author of *The Ethnic Restaurateur*



CATFISH DREAM

Ed Scott's Fight for His Family Farm and Racial Justice in the Mississippi Delta

Julian Rankin

“Julian Rankin eloquently describes how Ed Scott courageously struggles with the bureaucracy of racism, only to discover that the system is embedded in our society at both the local and the national levels.”

– William Ferris, author of *The South in Color: A Visual Journey*



STILL HUNGRY IN AMERICA

Photographs by Al Clayton

Text by Robert Coles

Introduction by Edward M. Kennedy

New foreword by Thomas J. Ward Jr.

“I am so grateful for the reissue of this extraordinary book—yet devastated that its message is still necessary today as it was fifty years ago.”

– Marian Wright Edelman, president, Children’s Defense Fund

Vinegar and Char:

Verse from the Southern Foodways Alliance

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Cook

kitchen
out back

a
way from buckra
who saunter
where he please
inside up and down
me

a
way from his wife
who scratch out fancy menus
seasoned with my tongue
hand
and tenderness

the only real pleasure
be my babies,
a small patch of something
where I grow okra and tomatoes,
and the name I will give myself
when I'm free
Mariah
Cook(e)

—KELLY NORMAN ELLIS





Shucking

My father lets down
The little drawbridge of his pickup truck,
A span of plywood planks on the back gate
Held level by hook and chain,
And dumps from the damp burlap
A load of locked doors
We've bought to break and enter,
Taking our spade-shaped knives
To the sharp and silted ridges of the oyster shells.

Almost safe inside the heavy canvas gloves,
Mule-brand, the fingers chewed through
By snags of ragged metal his acetylene
Cut back from the junked bodies of cars,
We look for leeways in the trap,
Any edge the blade can pry and widen,
Leverage to spring the hinge. I set aside
The hard ones for my father's savvy hands.
From the lusters of the bottom lid,
We split the raw attachments
And pour it all in a plastic pail—
Brine and gill plates and mantle—
My mother's turn now to turn
This plump meat seasoned by the sea
Into soups and stews and po-boy loaves
(Dredged in cornmeal, drowned in deep fat).

It's one more long Sunday when dinner waits
For my brother to drive down, late,
Through the pinesap airs of Hammond,
And for my sister to bring herself, late,
Across the white bridges, twin humps
On the billowed back of Lake Pontchartrain.

And so my father and I stand opening
The closed chambers, the cold valves,
And from these cups of calcium
Drink to each other a liquid
Of salt and grit, the oysters
Easing down like lumps in the throat.

—ELTON GLASER

Boy

Boy, let me have a taste of that Mister Misty.
No, they brought it out around the time you
were born in sixty. I like the way it swish
in the cup. Sound like Sammy Davis Jr.
doing the soft shoe shuffle. They call
that the sand dance. Sound like shifting grains
or a fast train. Them little bits of ice
tap your teeth, and you can chew on that sweet
mouthful of cold melting to nothing before
you swallow it down. First time I had one
of these, I drank it too fast, crystals in syrup
dancing around and down my throat chilled
like Christmas and New Year's cold breath moving
down to my chest. And if that wasn't enough,
then I felt like my head was about to split
right open. Thought my forehead was gon look
like that Dairy Queen sign red and wide
like a gash. You know, they ice cream got nothing
on your mama's pineapple ice cream. Theirs
ain't nothing but soft light ice milk. They build
it high like a steeple, but ain't nothing
to that either. You see your mama puts
a dozen eggs in her custard to make
it rich. The sound of the ice and salt shifting
in that bucket as it melts with that electric
churn's whining motor groaning as that ice
cream stiffens up sure is pleasing cause I know
the ice cream about ready. You know, there are
folks getting they heads split so we don't have
to go around to that side window no more.

—SEAN HILL





Fanny Says How to Make Potato Salad

Alright now. What you got to do is get some potatoes, I used to buy them big bags of Idaho potatoes, and you need to wursh them real good and boil them whole. Now, you know how your mama cooks, like this—*plom, plom, plom*—so just drop those fuckers in the water and don't worry about them till they get soft enough to just peel with your thumbs, but not too soft, cause we're making salad here, not mashed potatoes.

So then you've got to get you one stalk a celery, the whole thing now, and peel back them big strings, cause nobody wants to have to pick their teeth while they trying to smile at you telling you your salad's any good. And chop up that celery, and then you do the same to one green pepper, not the green onion, now, but the pepper, round-like and overpriced in the grocery store.

Boil and chop you four eggs. Also need you about six a them sweet pickles I love so much at Thanksgiving on the Lazy Susan. You can chop them up, or if you want, you can use a bit of that canned pickle relish your uncle always slopped on them nasty-ass hot dogs of his.

Also add one onion, chopped, and try to use a white one, especially them good old Vidalia onions, they not nearly as strong as the yella. Besides, you don't want to blow nobody out with your breath.

You need one a them big bowls, you know, about this big around, and mix it all real good with your hands. Now you know you got to have a little salt and pepper, and three tablespoons or so a mayonnaise, or if you want to make it the real way I used to like, use Miracle Whip. Now, be careful now with that mayo, make sure that shit's fresh or you'll ruin the whole batch and have everybody in the house running to the bathroom. Also add in about the same amount a plain yella mustard. You know, the kind that's yella as a gourd and comes in one a them round bottles.

While you're mixing it with your hands, bring the bottom to the top. You might even want to add a jar a pimentos for color. Now, be sure and take a bite in your mouth before you serve it—it's gotta have a little wang in it, it can't be dull. If it is, add a little bit a sugar or vinegar to it.

Cover it up and let it sit in the fridge for one hour. It should be enough to last you three or four nights, and of course, if your husband's coming home, you might want to make it all pretty by putting it all on top a some lettuce leaves and dusting it with a little a that paprika.

—NICKOLE BROWN

Backbone

Nana would say, *Come here child. What kind of comb does you mother use?* And then I would sit between her legs, where the bluish, flowery dressing gown spread over the reddish, flowery wingback. Howl as she dragged that paddle brush through my naps and rounds. *Hush girl.* I would grimace and spit and let tears itch up the corners of my eyes, staying still though, as she smoothed my scalp with the sweat off her highball—Glenlivet, 11:00 am, every day, come breast or bone, brain or lung—and wove the tufts into a fluffy braid half down my back. *Cancer? Hell.*

She'd turn on the Vivaldi, pat her chemo bag, teach me Spades. Aunt Wendy curled her hair for late church, and Daddy looked on, long faced, at us all. I would reach for a card and, *Ashy. Turn around and let me get some of this on you.* The Vaseline was always in a jar next to the lamp, behind the whiskey and the remote control. *It looks like you've been crawling around in flour on your knees and elbows.* Nana made those joint bones glisten, she did,

died, and my cousin, out loud
she wrote a menu, said—
*I know how to make cheesecake,
I know how to make shrimp,
I can fix corn pone, potatoes.*

But me, I knew in secret
how to make a shiny elbow
out of flour and Vaseline,
how to make a rope hang
from my head
with screams and scotch sweat.

— CAROLINE RANDALL WILLIAMS



Drill

Mama talks in this one.

Here's us, backing down our driveway's maze of red-dirt dog-legs, her at the wheel (with a fresh-forged license), me turned aroundnavigating, the yard black-dark but flushed now (and now) and nowwith brake-lights, her Kool-tip flaring on every hard in-breath, river-reek and oil-scorch and marsh-gas mingling, our under-chassis (andrear axle, eyeteeth) chattering due to roots and rain-ruts, our rust-crusting Rambler swerving and fishtailing and near-missing trees.

At the mailbox, gears knock, gnaw, grind, find Forward eventually: we're missile-heading straight (more or less) for the LowCountry fairgrounds; here's us, late, loud, breaknecking her blue-ribbon hoard to the Fair.

Everything is home-made.

Not just our back-seat freight of gem-flame jelly-jars (slip-skin grape, beet, black- and blueberry, brunt-apple, seed-splacked fig) and payload of pressure-torqued pickle-jars (wrick-kinked banana-peppers, lethal hot-hat peppers, (green) tear-tomatoes, hairy okra, baby-dills in brine), but also the crazy quilt safe-swaddling them, the gummed saliva-labels neat-naming them, my mama's name —hieroglyphical, grease-penciled, 'KAY' (KAZUE) HUTTO—branding lids.

Do you reckon tomorrow they'll put my picture in the paper?

Will somebody do a write-up when I win?

—ATSURO RILEY



When My Mother Is Away

My father, who hasn't cooked since they were married,
since he came up to the mountains from the coast,
makes red beans sweating with andouille,
leaves them all day to soak, then simmer on the stove.

When I call, he is too busy for the telephone.
The baseball game is on, the rice is on,
and if he lets it cook too long it goes to glue.
You know, sweetheart, he says, I have to pay attention to the stove.

My father goes home when our house is empty.
The days he spends alone: that false blank pulse
of the hurricane's eye on his boyhood city. Inside
his mother bends and dices celery beside the stove

and cooks it to invisible. You have to take it slow
and gentle if you want to get it right, and boil
the beans low to keep the skin from breaking.
She had patience for the heat and for the stove

and nothing else. This one accumulation she could take.
My father likes the whole mess peppered strong, one bite
enough to manufacture weather on his face: the moment
when he brings it to his mouth, the moment the storm breaks.

—MOLLY McCULLY BROWN





Ode

my Spanish is an itchy phantom limb;
it is reaching for words and only finding air.

—Melissa Lozada-Oliva, “My Spanish”

We are disappointments—we cannot make good of grief by giving it back to the tortilla, like my grandmother, burning it off her fingertips & into the dough, the front burner, a novela in flames. We are unlit pilot light—she, Virginia Slim. We eat her smoke, we landscape the hot discs with butter that glistens & pearls like the way *rr* leaves her mouth. We melt cheddar cheese. We add bacon & eggs, beans soaked overnight like her stubbornness. She cooks the bacon only to save the grease for the beans. She cooks the beans, then cooks the beans. *Tortilla* isn't a word that sounds like it lives anywhere near loss, but its location is *mano, brazo*, two places that have left the map of her. She tells us this is the last time she'll make them for us—she doesn't think she'll make it through many more nights of walking on water. The rolling pin hits the counter in its urgency, & we can't put love back where it came from like she does.

—ILIANA ROCHA

Acceptance Speech

The radio's replaying last night's winners
and the gratitude of the glamorous,
everyone thanking everybody for making everything
so possible, until I want to shush
the faucet, dry my hands, join in right here
at the cluttered podium of the sink, and thank

my mother for teaching me the true meaning of okra,
my children for putting back the growl in hunger,
my husband, primo uomo of dinner, for not
begrudging me this starring role—

without all of them, I know this soup
would not be here tonight.

And let me just add that I could not
have made it without the marrow bone, that blood-
brother to the broth, and the tomatoes
who opened up their hearts, and the self-effacing limas,
the blonde sorority of corn, the cayenne
and oregano who dashed in
in the nick of time.

Special thanks, as always, to the salt—
you know who you are—and to the knife,
who revealed the ripe beneath the rind,
the clean truth underneath the dirty peel.

—I hope I've not forgotten anyone—
oh, yes, to the celery and the parsnip,
those bit players only there to swell the scene,
let me just say: sometimes I know exactly how you feel.

But not tonight, not when it's all
coming to something and the heat is on and
I'm basking in another round
of blue applause.

—LYNN POWELL





Salat Behind Al's Mediterranean and American Food

This evening, in Birmingham,
when I'm meeting a friend
for fried chicken
and poetry,
you prostrate before God
on a piece of cardboard box
in the back alley.
Beside you, there is a dumpster
whispering styrofoam
and onion skins.
The shells of dead cockroaches
bend and crackle
under your knees. Even they pray.
The backdoor of the restaurant
and the towering
University Parking Deck
shelter you in shadow.
Fifteen minutes from now,
you will bring me cheap fries
and fingers,
and when you ask me
if I'd like ketchup,
your accent heavy as oil,
it sounds like a proverb—
clean tomato,
sovereign God.

—ASHLEY M. JONES

Jubilee

Come down to the water. Bring your snare drum,
your hubcaps, the trash can lid. Bring every
joyful noise you've held at bay so long.

The fish have risen to the surface this early
morning: flounder, shrimp, and every blue crab
this side of Mobile. Bottom feeders? Please.
They shine like your Grandpa Les' Cadillac,
the one you rode in, slow so all the girls
could see. They called to you like katydids.
And the springs in that car sounded like tubas
as you moved up and down. Make a soulful sound
unto the leather and the wheel, praise the man
who had the good sense to build a front seat
like a bed, who knew you'd never buy a car
that big if you only meant to drive it.

—GABRIELLE CALVOCORESSI



Why I Can't Cook for Your Self-Centered Architect Cousin

Because to me a dinner table's like a bed—
without love, it's all appetite and stains. Let's buy
take-out for your cousin, or order pizza—his toppings—

but I can't lift a spatula to serve him what I am.
Instead, invite our favorite misfits over: I'll feed
shaggy Otis who, after filet mignon, raised his plate

and sipped merlot sauce with such pleasure
my ego pardoned his manners. Or I'll call Mimi,
the chubby librarian, who paused over tiramisu—

"I haven't felt so satisfied since . . ." then cried
into its curls of chocolate. Or Randolph might stop by,
who once, celebrating his breakup with the vegetarian,

so packed the purse seine of his wiry body with shrimp
he unbuttoned his jeans and spent the evening
couched, "waiting for the swelling to go down."

Or maybe I'll just cook for us. I'll crush pine nuts
unhinged from the cones' prickly shingles.
I'll whittle the parmesan, and if I grate a knuckle

it's just more of me in my cooking. I'll disrobe
garlic cloves of rosy sheaths, thresh the basil
till moist, and liberate the oil. Then I'll dance

that green joy through the fettuccine, a tumbling,
leggy dish we'll imitate, after dessert.
If my embrace detects the five pounds you win

each year, you will merely seem a generous
portion. And if you bring my hand to your lips
and smell the garlic that lingers, that scents

the sweat you lick from the hollows of my clavicles,
you're tasting the reason that I can't cook
for your cousin—my saucy, my strongly seasoned love.

—BETH ANN FENNELLY



A Theory of Pole Beans

(for Ethel and Rice)

that must have been the tail end of the Depression
as well as the depression of coming war
there certainly was segregation and hatred and fear

these small towns and small minded people
trying to bend taller spirits down
were unable to succeed

there couldn't have been too much fun
assuming fun equates with irresponsibility

there was always food to be put on the table
clothes to be washed and ironed
hair to be pressed
gardens to be weeded

and children to talk to and teach
each other to love
and tend to

pole beans are not everyone's favorite
they make you think of pieces of fat back
cornbread
and maybe a piece of fried chicken

they are the staples of things unquestioned
they are broken and boiled

no one would say life handed you
a silver spoon or golden parachute
but you still
met married
bought a home reared a family
supported a church and kept a mighty faith
in your God and each other

they say love/is a many splendored thing
but maybe that's because we recognize
you loved no matter what the burden
you laughed no matter for the tears
you persevered in your love

and your garden remains in full bloom

—NIKKI GIOVANNI





Because Men Do What They Want to Do

and we do what has to be done. That's what *that's* about, Aunt Gwen said. My arms heavy with corn

for shucking. The sink filled with plucked greens for cleaning. Aunt Ethel, arms akimbo, hands in bright yellow

gloves just nodded in my direction before she tended the collards again. And I'll tell you what else—Aunt Dot

had been silent; we all paused as she punctuated her chopping with words—Yes, get the plate when he asks you. String up the linens,

turn down the beds. But once in a while, pick up a plate, like so. Throw it down. Oh yes, said Aunt Bebe, leaning

out to the screen porch, blowing smoke out of doors. *Frequency may vary.* The kitchen erupted. While the

men had been cheering the football game in the parlor, the laughter tipped the house—every ear fled a body,

collected against that kitchen's closed door. Bebe flicked out her cigarette, rinsed her hands, went back to breaking up chickens.

Ethel furiously scrubbed the greens. Gwen, to the boiling potatoes on the stove and Dot, her chopping. Too new to know better,

J—my husband—peered around the door then darted out. I grinned with teeth, tore at the silk. Yes, Ethel whispered. *Just like that.*

Show him any old hand can make a fist.

—TJ JARRETT

Little Love Poem

At 6 a.m. the sun considers everything,
humming its way past the Capitol.

I reheat yesterday's coffee,
put lima beans into a pot:

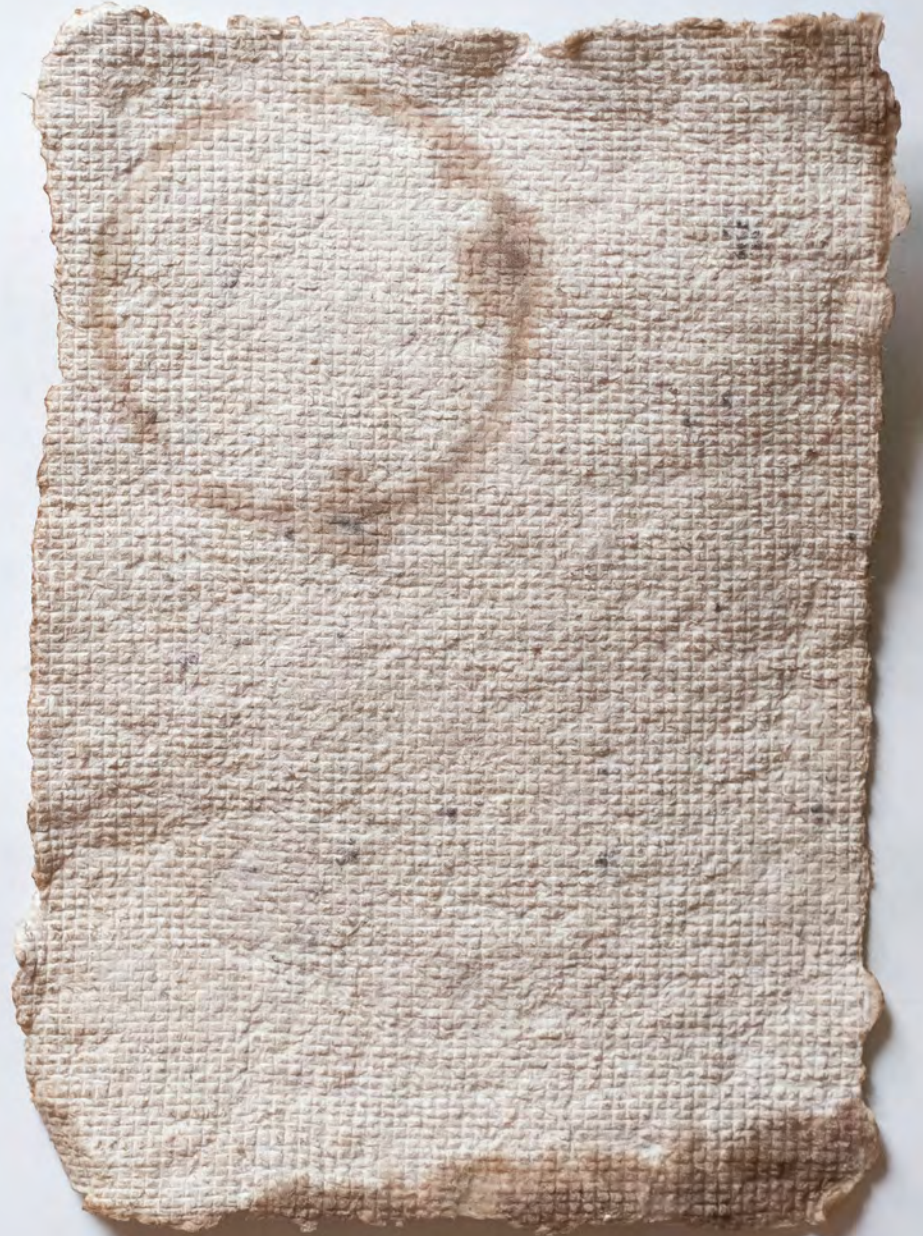
Fordhook, always Fordhook,
drizzled olive oil, pinch of salt, shake

of chili flakes. The chicken broth
comes to boil for a minute

before I cover, simmer. Soon he'll wake,
and I'll ask him to put a record on,

something with no words;
bowls, spoons, a single twist of pepper.

— SANDRA BEASLEY



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