

each other," he says of his customers. "But we are all the same. They come here to connect."

Despite their higher aspirations, Steve and Sydnie live the harsh realities of entrepreneurship. Steve says they recently added buffets in hopes of drumming up more business.

"I lost a lot of money," he says matter-of-factly. In the last three years, he has watched several of his businesses and real estate investments evaporate. As he tells it, he and his family have lost a couple of small fortunes. Only the two locations of the bakery remain.

"Now my wife and my children say, 'Dad, you can do it again.' And I say, 'I'm not sure,' and they say, 'Yes, we know you can.'"

He shrugs. "So I start one more time. But it's not easy."

Ashley Hall is a former newspaper woman and long-time peddler of fine French wine. A Birmingham, Alabama, native, she's now a loyal resident of Atlanta, Georgia.



Waiter, There's a Hair...

by Gillian Clark

"THERE IS A HAIR IN MY FOOD." If you're in the food business, those are seven words you never want to hear. The plate comes back, the hair prominently protruding high above the sauce, more noticeable than the parsley.

And I feel like an idiot for not seeing it before sending it to my hungry customer. The server brings the plate to me, that hair throbbing like a thumb just whacked by a hammer.

When it comes back to the kitchen I am compelled to pull the hair off the plate. A bit of mashed potato still clings to it. It always needs to be examined, studied. The plate doesn't go to the dish room until I've conducted my investigation.

This usually means that I let the hair hang from the tip of my knife and look it over under the brighter and harsher light of the kitchen. There are times it's been a fiber from a fluffy sweater. On these occasions it is bright and blue and scraggly—not human at all. There are times when it's been a pet hair carried on a jacket sleeve, or the man-made thread scratched loose from a hair weave, too long to be real.

Sometimes it is wavy and blonde. I scan the room to see where that hair might have come from. Did it float across the dining room from table 12, carried by the cool HVAC breeze, and decide the potatoes at the next table made for a perfect final resting spot?

No matter. My role is to hang my head in shame. My hair or not. How could I be so reckless? I am the nurse who drops the baby. The prison guard who lets the inmate grab his gun.

Sometimes, when I find a hair, I'm not filled with revulsion. Sometimes, when I find a hair, my gag reflex doesn't trigger.

Alone in my kitchen, in the early morning, when the produce comes off the truck, I'm the first to open the case of mangoes, the box of sugar snap peas, the wooden crate of ramps smelling sweet and oniony. I'm washing thirty two lemons for lemonade, when I notice the long brown hair swirling down the drain. When I lift the lid off the box of freckled green and sunrise-colored mangoes I spy a thick black strand, straight and heavy.

That hair is a messenger. Trying to tell me something. There was a person here. A woman who worries about her children. A guy who hopes he's going to be done in time to catch the ball game. Someone stood over this crate of ramps in West Virginia and, before he twisted it shut with wire, he left me a reminder that, no matter how clean and sanitized and microwaveably convenient we want our food to be, a real live human being, a hairy human being, has to pull that head of lettuce out of the ground.

Gillian Clark, Washington, D.C.-based chef and owner of The General Store and Post Office Tavern, is at work on a second book *The Colorado Kitchen Cookbook*, and a collection of short pieces and recipes based upon her radio essays on NPR's Weekend Edition.



THE MISSION of the Southern Foodways Alliance is to document, study, and celebrate the diverse food cultures of the changing American South.

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