



# VITTLES: A LOVE STORY

In Memphis, Cash and Jess Hewlette provision  
for queer pleasure and Black liberation.

BY FARON LEVESQUE

Photos by Andrea Morales



Cash Hewlette in the flower tunnel at Alpha Omega Veterans Services (AOVS) Urban Farm and Kitchen

“POWER, POWER LORD, POWER, POWER Lord...”

Nina Simone’s voice echoes through the squash patch.

Sweat is flowing like rivers and it’s not even 9 A.M. Cash Hewlette wears beekeeper gloves to protect her arms from the furry-sharp pokes of the cucurbit vines—zucchini, cucumbers, squash. Simone’s freedom song “Sinnerman” plays on Cash’s phone, the singer’s deep, eternal wail coming through loud and clear.

At this time of year—late June—Fridays are market-harvest days at the urban farm in Memphis where Cash and I work, part of a larger organization that serves military veterans who have experienced homelessness.

Cash and our farmrades bring crates of veggies into the wash-pack station where I’m rinsing the harvest. “Did you see the four-leaf clover I left for you?” she asks. I didn’t. Quickly I scan the metal sinks and wire-topped drying tables, but I don’t find the lucky clover.

“It’s OK,” Cash says. “I find them all the time.”

She opens a brown leather wallet and shows me her archive of clovers pressed between the faded green of a two-dollar bill. “If I have this, I’ll never be all the way broke.”

Working together, Cash and I have learned that we share a country-queer sensibility. Born in the Mississippi Delta town of Marks and raised in Memphis, Cash is a self-described Mississippian. “It’s being true country,” she explains, “loving the backwoods, fishing, maintaining and creating your own, whilst being slicker than a can of grease and embracing the progressions, the power, and diversity of the city of Memphis.”

Cash joined the Navy right after graduating from high school. She was a ship’s serviceperson. Aircraft carriers are like self-contained cities, and it was Cash’s job to stock provisions—from the clippers in the barbershop, to the airplane parts in the hangars, to the vending machines in the galleys.

Aboard the USS *Kitty Hawk* and the USS *George Washington*, she saw Chile, Brazil, and Guam. Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Singapore,



and Hong Kong, too. Thailand was her favorite—it reminded her of New Orleans, Las Vegas, Detroit, and Memphis all at once.

Traveling was great, but the complex, often traumatic experience of serving in the military forced Cash to reckon with ideas of home and belonging. By 2011, Cash was done with sailor life and trying to find her sea legs on dry land. This moment had a haziness to it, she told me. But there was also a rising clarity. “I can have a purposeful job and it does not have to be servicing my country or policing at all.” Growing and cooking food became an anchor for Cash’s vision of Black liberation. And then she met Jess.

Chef Jess Hewlette has spent years learning and laboring in some of Memphis’ most unique kitchens. Once upon a time, though, she was working at American Eagle at Oak Court Mall when a student named Cash came rolling in. “It was my first day on the sales floor as a manager. She had on these crazy Japanese pants. And I felt drawn to her. We walked around the store for an hour, matching her outfit.... I wrote my number on her receipt and told her to call me,” Jess remembers. They’ve been together ever since.

AFTER WE FINISH harvest, I drop Cash at the restaurant where Jess works. I don’t plan on staying long, but Chef Jess’ magnetic pull has me plopped down at the bar, muddy overalls and all. I watch as she swirls through the dining room, saying hi to everyone, her big, gorgeous laugh the soundtrack for an unexpected lunch of blackened catfish and succotash. The gift of queer joy shared freely nourishes a hunger I had forgotten about since the beginning of the pandemic.

Chef Jess’ mom, Yetta Stevenson-Reid, didn’t want her daughter to become a cook. “I think she wanted to spare me from trying something that would possibly let me down. And that made me want it even more,” Jess says. Reid was the cafeteria manager at Memphis’ Kingsbury High for most of Jess’ life, even staying on when Jess was a student there herself. Witnessing her mom feed the throngs of young eaters was its own education. “I watched my mother cook in the kitchen at home and at work. Watching her enjoy food and the feeling it gave people made me want to do the same.”

Jess says she’s wanted to pursue cooking as a career since she was seventeen. “But I was a



LEFT: Cash Hewlette checks kale seedlings at AOVs, September 2021.  
RIGHT: Jess Hewlette

straight-A student and was thus directed to go to college, which just didn't work for me at all. So I spent a lot of time trying to figure that out."

From the time they began dating in 2013, Cash was steady support for Jess. "She's not rose petals and mushy, but she walked with me when my self-esteem was nonexistent and helped me build myself up," Jess says. Cash provided the space for Jess to start envisioning a life that didn't have to follow preordained paths; to help her realize that there are so many alternate routes to living in community and in love. "I wouldn't have had the guts to go against the conventional college direction if it wasn't for Cash empowering me to trust in myself and my ability to do anything that I want, if I want it bad enough."

In the early days of working in restaurant kitchens, Jess felt that she was finally doing the work she was meant to do. Still, that work had its ups and downs. She experienced the deep lows of misogyny and the tyrannies of the salad station, as well as the highs of rallying her line to a near-perfect dinner service.

Cash and Jess remember early dates at Jasmine, a beloved Thai restaurant in Memphis. (It has since closed.) "Food," Jess says, "has always been a part of our love affair." Cash and Jess held down separate jobs but soon began cooking and serving food side by side. It was the experience of doing so on their own terms, in their own kitchen, and always right next to each other, that revealed the revolutionary possibilities of their collaborations. "One of my favorite things to do is cook with Cash on a sunny day with Zydeco music playing," Jess

says. In 2014, they gave their shared food project a name: Vittles.

VITTLES IS CASH and Jess handing out plates of tacos for guests at catered events, canning jams and jellies at craft wine and food festivals, advising chefs, home cooks, and food-justice nonprofits on menus and kitchen possibilities, and building coalitions with Memphis-area farmers. Their farm operation, Cash's Crops, is also growing out of

Vittles. Becoming landowners is next on their to-do list. They're saving up.

Vittles belongs to a long Black radical tradition of agricultural resistance, community knowledge, and food justice. "We take food our ancestors survived on and take it to the next level," Cash and Jess explain. They chose the name because it conjures that Memphississippi country warmth and conveys an invitation to be fed by way of the belly and the soul.

Cash believes that her agricultural expertise and work as a farmer would delight ancestors long gone. In Marks, Cash's people were sharecroppers and kept hogs. More than once, I've heard her say in the field, "If only my grandma could see me now." Her name was Lee Verna Braxton. Vittles is a love letter to Lee, and to Yetta.

Beyond the best-known personalities of the Memphis food scene, there are other vital, vibrant worlds. To understand the queer foodways of Memphis you have to go deep into the soils and muddy waters, the pleasures and the pains, the walk-in coolers, the hunger, the dirty dirty terroir of it all. There you'll find Jess. There you'll find Cash.

Together they have shown me—and they are showing our city—that there are so many ways of reimagining the world. Their work embodies the notion that healing is a daily practice of joy, of pleasure. And that pleasure is as essential a resource as food, shelter, or water. "Pleasure is the point," the activist and writer adrienne maree brown writes: "Feeling good is not frivolous, it is freedom." Infinite in possibility and rooted in a long history of struggle, queer pleasure is irrepressible

desire, ecstatic appetites. The long Black queer and trans liberation history of mutual aid, collective care, and chosen kin is a usable past, one that makes the practice of queer and trans pleasure in the historical present lush and powerful.

Chef Jess wields a radical hospitality that blurs the traditional binary of front of house, back of house. It rejects the status quo of food work—the entrenched hierarchies, the incentivizing of over-work, and the competitive careerism. It’s this energy of collectivity that gives Vittles life.

Vittles is a reckoning. Jess explained to me that it’s a chance “to invest in more than a career that is ever changing. I’d rather invest in people who will give me rooted meaning to life. I just want to create change that affects more than just my four walls.” Vittles is about owning your own labor and time. Cash puts it another way: “boss shit.”

Queer BIPOC food folx like Jess and Cash are building new worlds. Jess glides through kitchens, embodying queer radical hospitality, exuding

joy and resistance. Cash stewards the land—tending the city’s soil, honing sustainable farming techniques, and getting food where it’s needed most. For now, they are in a state of becoming, building relationships across the food and farm networks of the Mid-South. But eventually, they believe, the work of Vittles will become more visible and more accessible. “We’re growing and perfecting so that when the sun shines just right, we’ll burst through the dirt and sprout a strong stem bearing a beautiful flower,” Jess says.

“You’ve got to learn to leave the table when love’s no longer being served,” Nina Simone sang, with an invitation to the welcome table of liberation. Chef Jess and Farmer Cash are setting that welcome table in Memphis. They are seizing the means of food on their own terms and, in turn, creating the conditions for Memphians on the margins to build power and pleasure—one four-leaf clover, one two-dollar bill, one sunny Zydeco day in the kitchen at a time. ♡

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*Faron Levesque is a writer, host, and historian based in Memphis, Tennessee, their hometown. Faron runs a community kitchen for a small, hilltop farm by the airport, on the stolen land of the Chickasaw Nation. They research, teach, and write about the politics of memory, queer and trans ecologies, revolutionary imagination, and the radical history of food.*

