



# COMING HOME

SARAH COLE OPENS  
A BAKERY IN HER NATIVE  
ALABAMA BLACK BELT.

BY CALEB JOHNSON  
PHOTOS BY IRINA ZHOROV

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SARAH COLE PULLED TWO TRAYS OF WHOLE-GRAIN SOURDOUGH TALAMI OUT OF AN OVEN AND SLID THEM ONTO A STAINLESS-STEEL TABLE. ONE BATCH OF THE MIDDLE EASTERN FLATBREAD WAS SEASONED WITH ZA'ATAR; THE OTHER WITH POPPY SEEDS, SESAME SEEDS, ONION, AND GARLIC.

“Everyone told me doing something that is not Southern is not going to work in this rural community,” she said of Greensboro, Alabama, where she lives and works. Cole, who grew up half an hour away in Demopolis, turned her attention to a baklava. She spread a mixture of roasted nuts and dried fruits onto paper-thin dough sheets. “I felt like baking would be a good way to introduce people to [Middle Eastern] flavors.”

Since launching Abadir’s last October, her bakery has become a beloved part of this tight-knit town (pop. 3,149). Cole caters weddings and graduation parties. On Saturdays, she pops up at a downtown art gallery, or hauls her sweet and savory baked goods forty-five minutes up the road to the Tuscaloosa River Market. Most weekends, she sells out. Elderly women walk away with golden squares of sfouf, a turmeric cake. College kids snag pita pockets filled with seasonal produce.

As she paced between table and oven, where more bread was baking, Cole described Abadir’s as an experiment. She doesn’t work from written recipes. When deciding whether to add more spice—say, cardamom—Cole folds her hands behind her back and sniffs. Sometimes she calls up her mother, Margaret, who was born

in Egypt. Margaret came to the United States in the 1980s to escape persecution against Christians. She settled in Demopolis, where she met Cole’s father, Cleveland, while grocery shopping.

The Coles did most of their eating at home. “Some of my most vivid childhood memories are standing in the kitchen,

just watching my mom, whose back would always be to me,” Cole said. At first, she was only allowed to watch. Her mother, Cole said, is particular in the kitchen. “When she cooks, her kitchen is immaculate. She doesn’t even drop a crumb.” After mentioning this, Cole grabbed a dish towel and quickly wiped down the table in front of her.

She rents the kitchen space from the Hale Empowerment and Revitalization Organization (HERO). Its former tenant was PieLab, a bakeshop founded in 2009 with the idea that conversation, ideas, and change could take place over a slice of chocolate chess or key lime. The business closed its doors in September 2020 due to economic difficulties brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

I visited Cole at the kitchen on a Friday morning in April. She’d been there for hours, prepping for a busy weekend. At the end of her work area stood plastic bins filled with flour. Spelt, semolina, rice, almond, all-purpose. Sunlight beamed through tall north-facing windows beneath which rested cornmeal cakes topped with local strawberries. A refrigerator held homemade syrups, vegetables, and more berries.

“I’ve spent a lot of time alone baking, and it gives me time to reflect about what it is I’m actually doing and why I’m choosing to do it here,” Cole said of Abadir’s, which she named after her maternal great-grandfather. “It is kind of a way for me to ensure that other people who are different can feel like they have a place here.”

Cole, whose father is white, told me it wasn’t easy growing up in a mixed-race Alabama family during the 1990s and early 2000s. After 9/11, she says that some of her classmates called her a terrorist. Another time, someone stuffed a note containing a racial slur inside her locker. Demopolis was, and remains, a cliquish small town, she says. Strangers spoke in a different register when addressing her mother, as though uncertain how to



Cole bakes inside a restored Rosenwald schoolhouse located just off Main Street. Founded by Julius Rosenwald—a Jewish clothier who owned part of Sears, Roebuck, and Company—and Booker T. Washington, the Rosenwald Fund built more than 5,000 structures for the education of Black children across the South.

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communicate with her. Cole didn't always dress or eat like other kids. Her clothes came from thrift stores. At home, her mother cooked koshari, an Egyptian dish of rice, macaroni, and lentils topped with tomato sauce and vinegar. She seasoned her version of beef kofta with Middle Eastern spices and shaped it like a Southern-style meatloaf.

Margaret Cole improvised in the kitchen because some ingredients were impossible to come by in Demopolis. Others, Cole said, they couldn't afford on her father's produce-manager salary. This wasn't the case in New Jersey, where some of Cole's relatives lived. Sometimes they visited Alabama, and other times Cole traveled to them. One aunt owned a market, which meant she had access to Middle Eastern spices Cole had never tasted. "The flavors were so amplified," she said, recalling stuffed grape leaves and macaroni bechamel. There were homemade cookies and pastries, which Cole's mother never baked at home. "We could eat and enjoy those things together and talk about the meals and ingredients," Cole said. "We had that in common—those dishes—and that was my connection to them."

After college and graduate school, Cole

worked as a photojournalist in Huntsville. Long hours meant she was too tired to think about what she was eating or why. Gradually, her perception changed. She traded frozen pizza and Taco Bell meal kits for books on nutrition and considered becoming a personal trainer. She was unhappy in her journalism job but felt obligated to make use of her master's degree. She stuck it out for years until a friend offered to let her stay in a farmhouse outside Pittsburgh while she figured out her next move.

"I'm a planner, so taking this leap was really terrifying," Cole said of that time. "But I felt like if I didn't do it, I'd never do it."

In Pittsburgh, she worked at a bakery and managed a local farmers' market. Her ideas on nutrition and food access continued to evolve. She developed skills in the bakery's kitchen and grew more confident. Slowly, she began imagining how to synthesize her mother's improvisational cooking style with the bold flavors she'd encountered on those trips to visit her extended family. By the time an opportunity arose to return to Alabama, Cole had developed a culinary point of view.

At Abadir's, Cole uses as little refined





ABOVE: Dried fruit and nut baklava, strawberry cornmeal poundcake, coconut-date macaroons, and sticky chocolate cake cups; RIGHT: Sfouf (top); ma'amoul

sugar as possible, favoring honey instead. Initially, she aimed to limit each recipe to fifteen ingredients. Now, she said, she often uses fewer. Honey, dried fruits, almond flour, yogurt, buttermilk, and orange blossom and rose waters. The result is that each ingredient gets its chance to shine.

When I tried the talami, I noticed how the herby za'atar balanced the sourness of the spongy bread. The sweet notes of dried plums and molasses offset the bitterness of a sticky, dark-chocolate cake. I'm still thinking about Cole's strawberry cornmeal pound cake, redolent of cardamom.

Cole admitted it's a challenge to source quality local ingredients, especially flours, while keeping food costs low. She's committed to trying though. She now gets most of her vegetables, fruits, and herbs from Snow's Bend Farm in Coker, some fifty miles away. Her cornmeal comes from McEwen & Sons in Wilsonville, Alabama. She's on the lookout for

other purveyors, too.

"The last thing I want to do is come in and charge people too much money, compared to a carrot cake you can go buy at the gas station," Cole said.

This matters deeply in Hale County, where Greensboro is the county seat. The median household income hovers around \$34,000, and 21 percent of the population lives in poverty. Black residents make up 59 percent of the county's population, and while Cole said a mix of Greensboro's Black and white citizens come downtown to thrift, to get their hair done, to drink coffee, not everyone feels comfortable entering the art gallery where she sells her goods most Saturdays. She positions herself in the open doorway and beckons them with a smile. When Cole tells someone she grew up nearby, they often get excited to hear she's returned home. Others seem confused as to why a young person would come back to a rural region where the population is in decline.

Cole shared some frustration over her inability, thus far, to reach more people through pop-up events and farmers markets. She said there are long-ingrained race and class divides in Greensboro, as in so many rural Southern communities. "And we can pretend like those divides aren't there, but they are," she later wrote in an email.

She's looking into how Abadir's can offer discounted items for customers who participate in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). She's introduced herself to more civic organizations and catered an event at the nearby Newbern Library, a project of Auburn University's famed Rural Studio.

Visibility also presents a challenge. Cole doesn't have a brick-and-mortar retail space to sell her baked goods. While drizzling honey-rosewater syrup onto

the finished baklava, Cole described her plan to open a small café. She dreams of a place that will employ local folks with good wages. She wants an open kitchen so diners can see their food being made, and a menu highlighting fresh, locally grown produce.

However, she acknowledged it will take more than a well-curated menu and a handful of food-service jobs to achieve the kind of inclusivity and infrastructure she hopes to see develop across the Black Belt. Others have been working on this for a long time. Currently, Greensboro has one grocery store. Cole mentioned reviving an idea to open a food cooperative and, eventually, establish a network of co-ops across the region.

For now, she's writing grant proposals and looking for a space to open a culinary center that will offer workshops, classes, nutritional programming, and other creative outlets for the community.

"I like to look at the Black Belt as if we're a city," Cole said of the twenty-four county region, "so when one place benefits, maybe another can benefit."

Using a plastic tool to shape dated-stuffed cookies called ma'amoul, she continued pondering how she could best serve her home. She punctuated each thought by smacking the tool against the table to dislodge another piece of raw dough. Considering her current workspace, education is a key component for her vision.

"I'm hoping to connect people through food, but also provide a space that's a learning experience," she said. "I'm trying hard to find ways to shake things up here, but doing so with intention." 🐦



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