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SUMMER 2019 • NO. 72

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GRAVY

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ON THE COVER:
Servers at Ajax Diner on the Square in Oxford, MS. *Photo by Timothy Ivy*

THIS PAGE: Lynsey Weatherspoon

READING NATURE, SEEING NATURE

And counting turtles

BY SARA CAMP MILAM

TO DO A LITTLE RICE RESEARCH for an upcoming cookbook project, I recently picked up *Southern Provisions* by frequent SFA collaborator (and Ruth Fertel Keeper of the Flame honoree) David S. Shields. In his preface, I came across a reference to the SFA and the focus of our work.

"Since 1999, the SFA has celebrated vernacular cookery...highlighting stories told by the growers, harvesters, processors, cooks, and consumers. It has also greatly concerned itself with matters of social justice in the region. What the SFA has not undertaken is any large-scale history of any locale."

The SFA tells stories of people. When we privilege place, we usually examine the built or cultivated environment as seen through the eyes of those who live and work there. We rarely explore the unkempt edges of the farm, or venture into the woods. That might change, thanks to Janisse Ray.

Ray has made a life of looking closely, feeling deeply, and writing about the natural world. If you're familiar with her, it's likely through her first and best-known book, *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* (1999), a memoir and a lyrical study of the longleaf pine ecosystem of southeast Georgia.

Like other incisive Southern authors of both fiction and nonfiction, Ray writes of places where poverty and beauty go hand in hand. Ray grew up in a house on the edge of her father's junkyard, and she went on to develop a fierce love for the vast and ancient landscape that lay beyond the rusted-out cars. She crafts passages like, "A couple of million years ago a pine fell in love with a place that belonged to lightning. Flying past, a pine seed saw the open, flat land and grew covetous."

I was a little giddy when her story of a south Georgia mushroom forager named Ancil Jacques came my way. And I'm also a little giddy to share it with you, *Gravy* readers. Going forward, I plan to look for ways to seed these pages with more nature writing. I like how these pieces help us get out of our own way to focus on the physical world. While stories of people will always be our focus, it's not too much of a stretch to say that those stories are always somehow dependent on the environment.

I don't venture into the woods much, but I do take a lot of walks and spend a lot of time on playgrounds and in parks with a toddler. When you let a two-and-a-half-year-old do her own walking, your linear progress is pretty slow. But you notice things. Working with Janisse Ray reminded me how nice that is. In her writing, she rattles off colloquial and scientific names for plants and animals—beautiful, odd, endearing, or sinister—with an ease that's foreign to me. It made me wish that I could do the same.

At a park in Oxford, Sally and I stand on the pier and count the turtles swimming in the pond. On walks, she stops to collect sticks and check drains for water. We examine ant hills and daffodils, acorns and magnolia leaves. The science and nature writer Emma Marris tells us that these are vital ways of enjoying nature with children. (Watch her TED talk.) I'd add, they're nice for grown-ups, too. In a neighbor's yard earlier this spring, we saw an explosion of mushrooms that disappeared a few days later. They didn't look edible, but then I didn't have Janisse or Ancil to ask.

Here in Oxford, the weather has recently shifted from "let's get out and enjoy it!" to "uh-oh, here comes summer." By the time you read these words, we'll both be sweating. Still, here's to getting outside. I hope you find your own little piece of nature. Look at it, listen to it, maybe even write about it.

DTSSP

ANDRÉ GALLANT

Raised in the Canadian Maritimes, André Gallant moved to Athens, Georgia, in 1991. Reporting and writing his first book, *A High Low Tide: The Revival of a Southern Oyster* (UGA Press, 2018), helped connect his roots in the shellfishing world of Prince Edward Island to the salt marshes of the US South. When not pursuing seafood narratives, Gallant advocates for and writes about northeast Georgia's migrant and refugee communities. He holds an MFA in Narrative Media Writing from the University of Georgia, where he serves as part-time faculty in the Grady College of Journalism. In Canada, he says, a fresh tomato is expensive and hard to find. André appreciates the ease and pleasure of growing backyard tomatoes each summer with his wife and seven-year-old daughter.

JENNA MASON

Jenna Mason is a freelance writer and editor and SFA's content and media manager. She earned her master's degree in Spanish literature from the University of Georgia, where she taught for six years before moving to Oxford, Mississippi. Raised in a military family that moved every few years, Jenna delights in discovering the nuances of new places, particularly through food and music culture. As managing editor of *Oxford Magazine*, she sought out overlooked stories in and around her adopted city. Her 2019 *Gravy* column, Wait and See, draws on her two decades of experience in the service industry. A notorious overthinker, Jenna's favorite taste of summer is a lukewarm bottle of High Life, half covered in sand and set to the tune of mind-numbing ocean waves.

Top: Eric Gevirtz; Bottom: Carlynn Crosby

JANISSE RAY

Author, activist, and naturalist Janisse Ray lives on an organic farm near Savannah, Georgia, with cows, sheep, pigs, chickens, horses, and one recalcitrant and incorrigible mule. (Sometimes the cows mow her yard.) She has written five books of literary nonfiction on the environment and society, in addition to a collection of eco-poetry. She holds an MFA from the University of Montana, two honorary doctorate degrees, and in 2015 was inducted into the Georgia Writers Hall of Fame. The first wild mushrooms she ever ate were chanterelles growing on the campus of the University of Mississippi, home of SFA, when she was the John and Renée Grisham Writer-in-Residence. Her favorite taste of summer is pesto, made with pecans and Georgia olive oil—"100% local and *deeeelish*," she says.

LYNSEY WEATHERSPOON

Lynsey Weatherspoon is a commercial, portrait, and editorial photographer based in Atlanta and Birmingham. Her client base includes the person next door, the startup still in incubation, the established brand or business, and media companies. Her personal projects range from portraits of former members of the Negro Baseball League to the Gullah Geechee culture of the Sea Islands to Birmingham's historic Ensley neighborhood. She has produced editorial photography for *The New York Times*, NPR, and *AFAR* magazine and counts Coca-Cola and Google among her commercial clients. Her summers taste like a ripe tomato and mayonnaise sandwich on freshly baked white bread—the same kind her grandparents made for lunch when she was growing up. "Those memories will always make me smile when I make them for myself."

Bottom: Stanley Parrish

Ava Lowrey

SFA Pihakis Documentary Filmmaker

When did you make your first film?

I started making shorts in 2005 when I was fourteen. As far back as kindergarten, I was known to interrogate my very patient mother and her guests with my Playskool cassette tape recorder.

In the era of "Look at me!" you've chosen work that elevates others and puts you in the background. What's satisfying in that kind of work?

We learn by listening. It is an incredibly rewarding privilege and also a considerable responsibility to be trusted to tell the stories of the people we meet in this field.

When you're not making films, what are you reading, watching, or listening to?

Spending time on the road means listening to a lot of audiobooks and podcasts. Some of my favorite podcasts are *The Daily*, *Reply All*, and *Criminal*. An audiobook I recently finished and can't recommend enough is *Little Fires Everywhere* by Celeste Ng.

What's the best story you've ever told?

In 2013, I made a short documentary about Fred, a dirty and disheveled dog that wandered in to the tiny town of

Rockford, Alabama, not far from where I grew up. The townspeople adopted the mutt and he became known as the "town dog."

What Southern dish do you love? Loathe?

Few things hit the spot like the white beans and biscuits my mom cooked when I was growing up. When I feel homesick, it's my go-to meal. Much to the disappointment of my family, I do not like sweets, and pecan pie particularly offends my savory palate.

Photos by Carlynn Crosby

Annemarie Anderson

SFA Oral Historian

When did you collect your first story?

In 2014, as an undergraduate at the University of Florida, I applied to be a part of a summer oral history class. At the end of the semester, there were empty spots for a fieldwork trip that the Samuel Proctor Oral History Program had planned in the Mississippi Delta. Four days later, I got in a van with fifteen strangers and headed to Mississippi to interview Freedom Summer volunteers. I was hooked. I'm best at interviewing elderly ladies. I'm not really sure why, but they really open up to me.

In the era of "Look at me!" you've chosen work that elevates others and puts you in the background. What do you find satisfying in that kind of work?

I'm a steward of stories rather than a storyteller. My work exists because someone chose to share their life and their memories with me. Listening is hard and emotional. Connecting with strangers has transformed the way I see the world.

When you're not collecting and processing oral histories, what are you reading, watching, and listening to?

Currently, I'm reading *Swamplandia!* by Karen Russell. I'm watching *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*. I'm always on the road, so I listen to lots of audiobooks. The last one I finished was *Little Fires Everywhere* by Celeste Ng. (Ava and I listened to this one together on a trip to

northwest Arkansas.) It was heartbreaking but good. My favorite audiobooks are the Harry Potter series narrated by Jim Dale. He is a mean impersonator of both Hagrid and Professor McGonagall.

What's the best story you've ever told?

The work I'm most proud of is my master's thesis work. I collected fifteen interviews about African American life in the Florida Panhandle. Those interviews challenged me to think about the place I am from in a more nuanced way.

What Southern dish do you love? Loathe?

I love cheese grits. If I eat them in the morning, my day will be good. My least favorite food is baby lima beans. I hated them as a child, and I hate them now.

THE YEAR THAT CHANGED THE SOUTH

Why 1982 matters

BY JOHN T. EDGE

GENE HAMER AND BILL NEAL opened Crook's Corner in 1982, in a onetime taxi driver stand in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Soon, they began serving shrimp and grits for dinner; in time they shaped a new and inclusive narrative about the South. In 1982, Nathalie Dupree published her first book, *Cooking of the South*. She promised to put the "glory back in grits and gravy." That same year, Frank Stitt, a native of upstate Cullman, Alabama, opened Highlands Bar & Grill in Birmingham. He showcased food from the South and technique from the south of France.

Daniel Maye and Phillip Cooke staged the first Symposium on American Cuisine in Louisville, Kentucky, in 1982. Larry Forgione, the pioneering chef at An American Place in New York City, spoke. So did Lidia Bastianich, who rose to fame interpreting Italian-American cuisine. Collectively, they announced that American cuisine was ready to step beyond the long French shadow. Imagined as a promotional vehicle for a new Louisville restaurant, the symposium would prove a lodestar moment in the reappraisal of American regional cooking and a boon to the rise of New Southern Cuisine.

Though the SFA did not come into focus until 1999, when John Egerton convened fifty founders in Birmingham to talk about responsibilities and possibilities, I now recognize the roots of whom we gather and what we attempt in those restaurant openings, those book publications, that symposium, and that year.

It would be a stretch to say Ronald Reagan made that 1982 moment possible. But not much of a stretch. Republicans believed that his vision stirred a new pride in our nation, its people, and its culture. His message, grounded in states' rights rhetoric, appealed to

Kristen Solecki

conservative Southerners. Democrats, citing his cuts to the social welfare network and hawkish foreign policy, saw Reagan as retrograde. Liberal Southerners thought Reagan and his Young Republicans like Ralph Reed of Georgia personified the boulders that blocked the road toward progress.

I didn't pay much attention to politics in 1982. In my third year of college, I was often oblivious to the changes that swirled around me. But I did spend a lot of time in bars. And I did listen to a lot of live music. Looking back, I recognize that my ear for my region began to shift that year, soon after R.E.M. released its first EP, *Chronic Town*. My understanding of the South began to shift then, too.

Unlike the white-boy blues narratives of the Allman Brothers and Wet Willie, the Macon, Georgia, bands I idolized when I was younger, R.E.M. crafted songs that were complicated and cryptic. They suggested that Athens, Georgia, where I went to college and where R.E.M. was born, was worthy of close attention and reinvention. They implied that the South was ready for the same. *Fables of the Reconstruction/ Reconstruction of the Fables*, which R.E.M. released in 1985, would confirm my hunch.

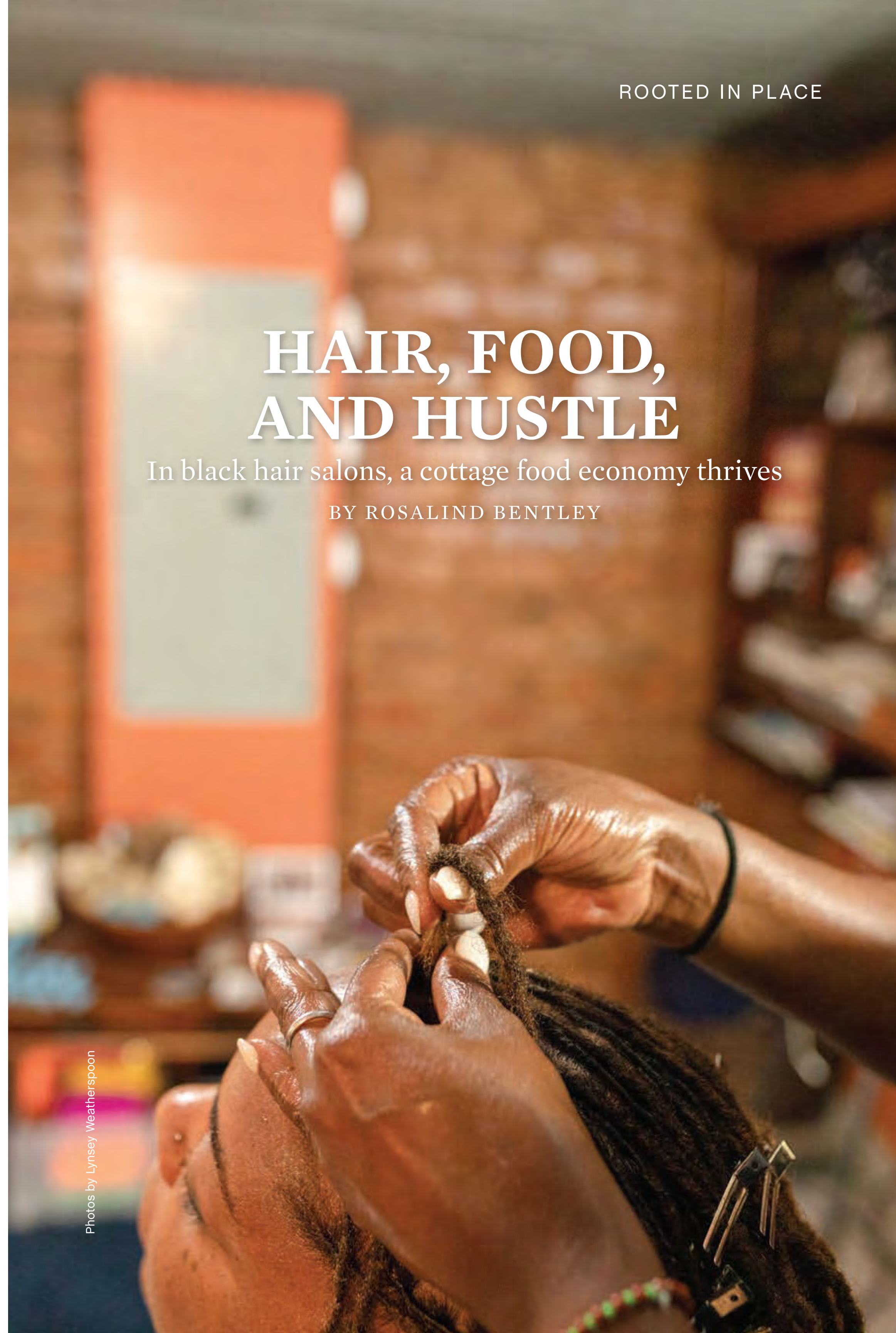
Rock was art, R.E.M. made clear, and art was worth paying attention to. About the time I started listening to them, I saw Jason and the Nashville Scorchers play an Athens double bill with the Psychedelic Furs. When Jason Ringenberg ripped apart the Hank Williams song "I Saw the Light" and leaped off stage into the audience, I heard the traditional South recast. Much later, as I began to think and write about food, I recognized that art might be something I could attempt ,and change might be something I could help drive.

I recently spoke with historian Grace Hale, whose forthcoming book, *Cool Town: Athens, Georgia, and the Promise of Alternative Culture in Reagan's America*, digs deep into why and how and to what effect my college town became a cultural incubator. She said that Athens in the 1970s and 80s defined itself as an oppositional force. She quoted the music journalist Greil Marcus, who, writing in that same era, said that bands can serve as images of communities. After I moved to Oxford in the 1990s and started writing and thinking about food, I realized that restaurants can serve comparable purposes. Put another way, we are more than *what* we eat. We are *where* we eat.

"I think that food in America can be all those things that we envy other cultures in being," Paul Prudhomme, the onetime Commander's Palace chef, who won international acclaim while working the stove of his restaurant K-Paul's, declared at that 1982 Symposium on American Cuisine. "Our restaurants have a huge task ahead.... [We must] accept the responsibilities of who we are and what we are and carry on." Prudhomme was talking about cooking and about food. He was also arguing that food was a cultural totem and a social force.

The lyrics and voices of 1982 still echo in my head. Nearly forty years after Bill Neal served his first dish of shrimp and grits and hired his first rock-and-roller dishwasher, I recognize that food held similar power in that moment. Together, those cultural products remind me of how this all began, of what was at stake, and of what's possible when we harness the power of creativity to make change in our backyards.

John T. Edge is the founding director of the SFA and the host of TrueSouth *on the SEC Network/ESPN.*



HAIR, FOOD, AND HUSTLE

In black hair salons, a cottage food economy thrives

BY ROSALIND BENTLEY

Photos by Lynsey Weatherspoon

Off the Hook Barbershop, Atlanta

THE ANNUAL FAMILY CHRISTMAS Eve dinner my partner and I host is a little fancy, so for last year's event I wanted an updo. It was to be a sweeping, modified beehive requiring Shannon, my stylist, to wash and deep condition my dreadlocks before twisting each salt-and-pepper strand tightly at the root, clamping the coils with clips as she went. Then, I'd sit under the hooded dryer for at least forty-five minutes, followed by another forty-five minutes of more twisting, more pinning, more winding, Shannon's nimble fingers weaving over and through as though shaping a seagrass basket.

All told, I'd be there three, maybe four hours.

Beauty has its price whether paid by wallet or clock, so I leaned my head back into the shampoo basin and she got to work. In a rush to get to my appointment on time, I'd skipped breakfast. My stomach growled. All Shannon had to snack on were a couple of granola bars, some pretzels, and a package of almonds lingering in a forlorn box.

As Shannon twirled the first cords, I flipped through a magazine.

"Oh, no," she said.

Her fingers froze.

"What?" I asked.

By her tone, I thought she'd seen some abnormality on my scalp.

"Everything ok?" I asked again.

"Yeah, it's just, it's...The Cobbler Man is here," Shannon stammered.

She meant dessert, not shoes.

"Is it nasty?"

"No! It's good. I can't—I'm not—*oooo*, I'm not supposed to have it."

She wiped her hands on a towel and reached for her purse.

WHEN SHANNON MOVED from the Buckhead salon where I first met her about four years ago to this new space where she is the sole operator, I was happy for her. Yet selfishly I worried I'd miss the ritual and balm of a large African American salon: loud debates over Steve Harvey's latest gaffe; neo-soul or gospel blaring; the overheard prayer between a stylist and customer for a personal trial to soon pass. And one of the supreme joys of her old location was good food.

Getting our hair done can mean giving up the better part of a morning or afternoon. This food feels like a reward for endurance. Food for sale, by us, for us, each stylist's chair cradling an empty belly and thick wallet.

Atlanta is the capital of black hair. It's also the locus of a robust network of home cooks serving those doing hair and those getting our hair done. Shannon, who came up working in her stepmother's salon here, said she's never worked at a beauty shop where someone didn't come by selling plates. There's a scene in the 2005 comedy *Beauty Shop*, set in Atlanta, where a character hawks a cart full of soul food, from pig knuckles to Sock-It-To-Me cake. Vendors like that usually showed up at Shannon's old shop.

> Getting our hair done can mean giving up the better part of a morning or afternoon. Salon food feels like a reward for endurance.

There was the chocolate-dipped-strawberry lady whose treats we savored near the NO FOOD sign by the drying station. There was the cookie lady, who sold snickerdoodles and oatmeal raisins in tiny bundles, sometimes still warm. Later, options expanded to include the brother who sells oxtail stew and jerk chicken in

a container small enough to balance on your lap, your salon cape serving as an oversized bib.

The Cobbler Man came into Shannon's new shop happy as a caroler and pulling a cooler full of treats. He wore a blazer, simple shirt, and crisp jeans. His jewelry had just the right amount of bling, and his hair and beard were lined so crisply he looked like he'd just slipped out of the barber's chair. Shannon was already a goner, but I was skeptical. He saw the faint grimace on my face. As he would later tell me, he guessed that I had been "traumatized by some nasty peach cobbler" before.

"Would you like to try the best peach cobbler in the history of the planet?" he asked.

I must have said, "Come on, bruh," or some other rebuff, because from the top of his cooler he picked up a small tray covered with communion-cup samples of the day's cobblers: classic peach and a concoction he called "fruit loop": apple, pear, and cherry. Red and blue colored sugar freckled the top. I took that one. He laced his hands and leaned back as I took my first bite.

The tiny cubes of fruit retained their structure. Bitsy dumplings stippled the filling. I bought three. Each pan was no bigger than my hand. He smiled, thanked us for our business and moved on to the next shop, satisfied his point was proven. (I would meet the Cobbler Man again in a couple of months and learn his name is Joshua Elijah. His late stepmother, Ivy Johnson, taught him to make the dessert as she had learned growing up in Mobile. He named his business "Ivy's Heavenly Cobbler" after her.)

When I got home, my hair fierce and redolent with aromatic oils, I put the cobblers on top of the kitchen stove and made a half-hearted offer to share the haul with my partner.

FOR MANY BLACK WOMEN, our mother's kitchens were our first beauty shops. They were the site of a shared ritual we were subjected to as girls. The kitchen symbolized nourishment, but it was also a place where our mother's hands acted on a precept rooted in white supremacy: Pretty hair was straight, not nappy.

If your mother didn't use a chemical straightener on your hair, she probably used a hot comb, as my mother did. She placed a low-backed stool or dining-room chair near the stove. The flame of a front burner flickered above simmer but well below boil. Then, my mother put the teeth of a metal straightening comb on the burner. My freshly washed and dried hair was parted into sections and rubbed with Ultra Sheen Creme Satin-Press. When she thought the comb was warm enough, she lifted it from the fire, quickly laid it on a white paper towel to make sure it didn't scorch, then ran it through my hair. The yellow grease sizzled and smoked. My head smelled of melting wax and submission. The process continued until every strand was straight. It remained that way for a week or so, or at least until moisture hit it—then it would puff and kink as nature intended. When that happened, it was time for the ritual once again.

Tiffany M. Gill and I commiserated about the practice recently during a conversation about the intersection of beauty shops and the plate economy. Gill is a professor of Africana Studies at the University of Delaware and author of *Beauty Shop Politics: African American Women's Activism in the Beauty Industry*.

For generations, beauty shops have been community gathering places for black women, spaces where we can be vulnerable. Inside, we don't have to code switch. We are in the care of someone who will lay hands on our hair and groom it into a style that gives us confidence to

face whatever comes next. Because black communities historically have nurtured informal economies when racism shuts them out of "legitimate" ones, the idea of the Cobbler Man or the Pound Cake Lady coming into a salon to sell a plate of comfort tracks.

Where and when the tradition began, Gill doesn't know, but she said it is age-old. And while not all black salons welcome someone selling hot plates, the practice isn't a pejorative within the larger community.

"These are spaces where African Americans who are entrepreneurs within the informal economy, those who are creating their own food and selling it, that beauty shops and barber shops become a safe place for them to see that," Gill said. Because it's not a place where people are going to ask, 'Where's your food license?'"

THE PLATE ECONOMY, the informal food economy, the cottage food economy: Called by whatever name, it has always held special power in communities of color and immigrant communities. Wives sell homemade tamales to men on lunch break; siblings pinch tender dumpling dough into savory pouches to sell to devoted customers; elderly African American ladies freeze Kool-Aid or fruit punch in paper cups, then sell them for a nickel or a dime to neighborhood kids.

In the informal economy, there's always the danger of getting caught. Yet sales pay mortgages, buy school clothes, and keep the lights on and gas flowing for people for whom the traditional economy is too high a hurdle to clear. Some cooks want the flexibility of staying home with their kids while still earning an income. Others don't want to pay the fees of a commissary kitchen that would offer them a commercial-grade prep space. Some don't care to tangle with, or don't know about, the layered licensing requirements many states demand of cottage food producers. Many states set caps on how much a cottage food business can earn per year.

Joshua Elijah's career is built on the plate economy. I caught up with him again on a Saturday morning in early March in the suburban Atlanta home he shares with his fiancée. He'd been in the kitchen since 5 A.M., preparing the day's inventory. At the stove, wisps of steam encircled Joshua's right hand as he plunged kitchen shears into an enamel pot where apple slices bubbled in syrup. With each staccato *snip, snip, snip*, of the blades, the fruit slices became confetti. Again, I had not had breakfast. The aroma of warm sugar, nutmeg, cinnamon, and fruit made my belly cramp. He worked the dough on the granite countertop, panting gently as his thick fingers pushed. The crust, rich with lard, responded. "The crust is the star," Joshua said. "It's important that there's crust and a peach in every bite."

> "The only way to survive is your food has to be excellent. You don't have a website. You don't have a building. You just have you and your food."

As he cooked, he told me his story. He's forty-three years old and grew up in California. For a while he was a church musician, but when that didn't pull in enough money, he said, he started selling weed. Trying for a fresh start, he moved to Atlanta about ten years ago. With him he brought his stepmother's cobbler recipe and a gift for salesmanship. Even with family here, he couldn't get a foothold. At bottom, he borrowed $35 in food stamps from a friend he was living with and made some cobbler. He took it to a barbershop in Stone Mountain. It sold out.

"Six months after, I was in the peach cobbler game," he said.

That was about seven years ago. It's all he's done since, he told me. On a good day he can make $500 from $90 in supplies. A nice turn, considering Georgia's cottage food law does not put a limit on sales. But Joshua has not gotten a license yet. He understands the rules are there so no one gets sick. He is part of an ecosystem of "people who have decided to declare economic justice for themselves, working out of their own kitchen," as he put it. "But the only way to survive is your food has to be excellent. You don't have a building. You don't have a website. You just have you and your food."

By chance, a few weeks later, he showed me what he meant. I was shadowing the Cocktail Lady, whose motto boasts that she brings "the party to you." Joshua had bragged about her presentation: Each rainbow-hued drink is topped with a thick haze of vapor from a nugget of dry ice at the bottom of the glass. Candy-coated straws in contrasting colors make the finished drink look like a tropical spring break.

The Cocktail Lady and I were near the end of her salon rounds, on the city's west side, when we ran into Joshua. She'd used the same sample all day. By 5 P.M., it had lost its froth—and its appeal.

"Uhmm, umm, you need to have that smoking," Joshua told her. "I don't see any smoke. That needs to be right."

His tone was more encouraging than competitive, a dynamic I witnessed among the vendors I saw.

As with the Cocktail Lady, Joshua usually runs into other vendors, like the Banana Pudding Man, the Dessert-in-a-Jar Lady, and one of the titans of the game, the elusive Isaac. He sells everything from curried shrimp to turkey sliders to grilled vegetables, always chilled and ready for the microwave. (Stylists are often so busy they have to fit in meals when they can.) When I finally caught up with him, he told me he now splits his time between beauty shops and film sets. But for Joshua, and the other vendors I met this spring, salons remain their mainstay. As black women, we are going to get our hair done, pressed, natural, weaved, or otherwise. And we are going to eat.

That Saturday in March, when I met him at his house, Joshua let me tag along on his Saturday rounds. He paid a friend to drive so he could field call-in orders. By the time we hit the tenth shop, he was running low on inventory. Three ladies were lined up under dryers. 2Pac's classic, "I Ain't Mad at Cha," rolled from the speakers. "*You tryin' hard to maintain, then go 'head cuz I ain't mad at cha.*"

"Would you like to try?" Joshua asked, holding out a tray of both samples. "It's the best peach cobbler on the planet."

"What's this green stuff?" one of them asked.

Joshua explained that the color-coded sugars indicated each flavor. Green meant apple. Peach was unadorned.

They each took a cup. They tasted. Then at least one of them reached for her purse.

Rosalind Bentley is an SFA Smith Fellow and a senior writer with The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. *Follow her on Twitter @rozrbentley.*

Alexis Meza de los Santos in Lexington, Kentucky

ALEXIS MEZA DE LOS SANTOS, SOUTHERNER

Lessons from a SoCal-Bluegrass exchange

BY GUSTAVO ARELLANO

Photos by Nicole Boliaux

I'LL NEVER FORGET THE FIRST time I met Alexis Meza de los Santos.

It was around 2015, and I had just screened an early episode of *Bordertown*, the animated television series for which I served as a consultant, at the University of Kentucky. Alexis wanted to interview me for *Lexington Community Radio*, a request to which I grudgingly obliged. Reporters in their early careers are always kind but rarely memorable, because they tend to take a paint-by-numbers approach to interviews. Alexis proved an exception. She had researched who I was, so her questions were sharp; her follow-up queries showed she paid attention to my responses. She pushed for better answers the way a good reporter does.

What I thought was going to be a quick chat about tacos turned into a one-hour discussion about my life, my work, and where I thought journalism and food studies were going.

More than her work ethic, I was intrigued by Alexis' story. She was a *mexicana,* and undocumented. She moved to Lancaster, Kentucky, as an adolescent and had a front-row seat to the emergence of *el Sur Latino,* a South where Latinos play an increasingly important role.

I told Alexis to keep in touch; she suggested Mexican restaurants I should profile for an SFA oral history project. (She'd continue the project in 2017, with a focus on Latino restaurateurs in Lexington.)

Alexis presented her oral history work at the 2017 Southern Foodways Symposium in Oxford. Then twenty-six, she quickly charmed my wife, Delilah, and other friends from Southern California who attended. We found her enthusiasm invigorating, her laugh infectious, and her work inspiring. She was the first Latina Southerner my friends had met, and they were impressed.

Alexis surprised us, though, when we said our goodbyes at Memphis International Airport. She confessed to having never visited California. How was it for Latinos out there?

My friends and I all looked at each other. *Um, cool?*

We just didn't think about it, I told Alexis. There were so many of us that we took a Latino-majority existence for granted.

"Ah, you guys don't know how good you've got it!" Alexis said with a loud giggle.

> Latinos make up 7% of Kentucky's population. That relatively small figure might surprise non-Kentuckians, who assume that the Bluegrass state is lily-white.

Delilah told Alexis we'd host her if she ever visited California, as a sort of cultural exchange. She had taught me about Latinos in the South over the years; we would show her Latinos in SoCal.

This March, our cultural exchange began.

AFTER ATTENDING AN academic conference in Los Angeles, Alexis took the train down to Santa Ana, where my wife and I live. It's statistically one of the most Latino big cities in the United States—77 percent of its 300,000 residents are Latino—yet most Americans can't imagine such a city within Orange County, a place typecast for decades as a white, wealthy enclave. Where I live,

Mexicans aren't the "other"—unlike Alexis' Lexington, where Latinos make up only 7 percent of the population. (That relatively small figure would surprise many non-Kentuckians, who assume that the Bluegrass is lily-white.)

"This is the OC?" Alexis asked, as we drove through working-class neighborhoods and rows of taco trucks and Mexican restaurants. "This is a dream."

We arrived at Delilah's restaurant, Alta Baja Market. I showed her Kentucky molasses for sale, along with containers of pimento cheese. "So, the South is cool in Cali for Mexicans?" Alexis asked.

Not really, I admitted. This was it—along with bourbon, Nashville hot chicken, and maybe college football. Mostly, my friends and family know about the South through negative stereotypes. They still can't understand why I choose to spend so much time there.

And they've never met a Latina like Alexis Meza. Children of immigrants have always contended with multiple identities—but whereas my generation fretted about whether we were too much of either side of the hyphen, Alexis' generation has thrown away the darned mark. She's equally proud of her *mexicana* and Southern identity, and sees no reason to keep them away from each other. That's something I've seen among Latino Southerners.

Something liberating.

Delilah brought us snacks and drinks. Alexis enjoyed her passion fruit–chile-mango michelada, a beer cocktail from Mexico, and said that University of Kentucky undergrads couldn't get enough of Mexican culture.

"Why do you think?" I asked.

"Because it's the easiest part of us to consume. *Talking* to us is way more difficult."

It's capitalism at its most exploitative: Consume the cultural markers of a minority, while shunning the people who created it. But time eventually brings social capital back to the makers, I told her. California is still not perfect for Latinos, but it's far better than when I grew up.

The same gradual acceptance, I continued, would happen in the South. Out West, we benefit from a 150-year head start.

Alexis' time with us was tight, so I drive her back to the train station. Before we left, though, I took her to a taco truck to buy picaditas. It's a dish from her native Veracruz that consists of a patted-out, grilled masa cake smeared with crema and salsa—think a mestizo hoecake. The only time she could eat picaditas back in Kentucky, Alexis said, was when her mom made them—and even then, they couldn't source the right type of masa.

"Really?" I said. "They're all over Santa Ana."

Alexis could barely contain her glee as I handed her a meal I eat at least once a week without a second thought. We bid farewell, and I gave her some culinary homework for her L.A. travels.

OVER THE NEXT WEEK, Alexis excitedly texted me updates. She strolled around Olvera Street, an outdoor shopping plaza created in the 1930s by L.A.'s city boosters as a romanticized version of Mexican life, even as those same authorities made Mexican Angelenos live in segregated neighborhoods.

ABOVE: Alexis at home with her parents, Noe Meza and Rosario de los Santos; OPPOSITE: Pastries from Panadería Aguascalientes in Lexington

Olvera Street is now mostly a tourist trap. Yet Alexis admitted to crying when she walked around.

"It was exactly the image of what I keep in my memories of what Mexico looks like," she said.

If Latinos in Southern California read that passage, I'm sure the majority will snicker. Tears for *Olvera Street*?

But I'd tell them to check their privilege. Latinos across the United States need more visits from people like Alexis, from newer Latino communities, to make us appreciate what we have.

As much as I love traveling to the South, I could not imagine living there as a Latino, removed from proximity to the US-Mexico border, away from an area where I'm part of the majority instead of a minority.

Southern Latinos like Alexis don't take their culture for granted. They appreciate the tacos, the music, far more than those of us who live it daily ever do. Alexis reminded me why I admire the people of *el Sur Latino* so much: They lead vibrant lives in a region our ancestors never expected to live in. In a region still feared by non-residents as a nightmare for people of color, Latinos have not just created a home for themselves—they're now increasingly defining what's next for the South.

They don't just teach Southerners about Latino life; they teach the rest of us Latinos.

Gustavo Arellano is Gravy's *first columnist and a features reporter for the* Los Angeles Times *opinion section.*

"I WAS RAISED BY A SINGLE MOTHER"

Let's talk about what that means

BY JENNA MASON

FROM LEFT: Servers Amie Irwin, Coulter Fussell, Katherine Montague, and Sarah Costa at Ajax Diner

Photos by Timothy Ivy

COULTER FUSSELL HAS WAITED tables at Ajax Diner in Oxford, Mississippi, for nineteen years. She's bartended at Saint Leo for three. Coulter also owns YaloRUN Textiles, an experimental textile studio and supply store in nearby Water Valley, where she teaches sewing and native-natural dying workshops and crafts narrative quilts by hand. She's the full-time parent to sons Amos Henry and Booker, ages eleven and eight.

In January, Coulter was named a 2019 United States Artist Fellow in Craft for her quilting, an honor that comes with a considerable stipend—more than she would make in a year otherwise. Her story epitomizes everything I want to believe about single mothers. I want to trust that, with enough hard work, I can advance in my own career and piece together some financial security. I want to be the unstoppable single mom.

You know that mom. She is emotionally and psychologically resilient. She sacrifices her own time and energy for her children's well-being. She works multiple jobs, budgets her income, puts away savings. She never complains and never slows down. Her children develop responsibility and grit. As adults, they praise her example as the key to their success.

I come from a long line of these women. My grandmother, stepmother, aunt, and stepsister all raised their children alone. Every one of them pulled it off by waiting tables. When I became a single mother, I took the serving skills I'd picked up as a young adult to an upscale, wine-driven restaurant just south of Oxford. After eighteen months, I moved to Saint Leo, an Italian spot downtown, where I've served for three years.

Waiting tables holds a specific appeal for single mothers. Flexible hours make it feasible to juggle another job with a serving gig. We often take tips home at the end of a shift, and that cash can bridge the gap between bimonthly paychecks. Since we're raising children, multitasking and anticipating customer needs seem like second nature. Hospitality consultants preach "swan theory," the notion that a server should make her job look easy, no matter how hard she's working below the surface. That perseverance and positivity are already expected of single moms.

We also tackle unique obstacles in a restaurant setting. Many single mothers work day shifts while their children attend school, so they bring in fewer tips than night servers. School holidays, child illness, and summer vacation all mean wages lost, either to a sitter or by giving up a shift. A parent working in an office might use her lunch break to take a child to the dentist; a server forfeits an entire day's work. Restaurants rarely offer health insurance or paid time off, and wages might vary dramatically by season. The no-whining mindset of the service industry makes it challenging to ask for special accommodations.

In a college town, waiting tables as a single mother can feel isolating. I serve alongside college students. I rely on them to cover shifts for childcare reasons or illness, and I can rarely return the favor. I seldom find time to bond with my coworkers over shift drinks. Most moms I know in Oxford work at the University or in the home, and I regularly decline invitations to spend time with them because of my serving schedule. I often wait on the parents of my kids' classmates.

Anxiety and guilt wear on me. Do my

children resent that I can't attend every soccer game or invite their friends to spend the night on the weekend? Do my coworkers think I'm selfish or snobbish? Do my friends feel neglected? Do those parents think differently of me because I wait tables?

That feel-good trope of the fierce single mother easily morphs from empowering to impossible. I don't feel inspired by Coulter's success story. I feel inadequate. I feel exhausted.

To admit physical and psychological weakness contradicts the mantra I've learned from the waitress-mothers in my family: "Keep working, keep smiling, and laugh all the way to the bank." I want to do their legacy justice. I want to embody their resilience and strength. The myth is much more appealing than the truth.

The truth is, I don't feel strong when my daughter asks about the circles under my eyes. I don't feel invincible when she and her brother have to sit quietly through staff meetings or read a book at the bar while I finish my sidework. I don't feel proud that I spend my Sundays catching up on sleep and housework and grocery shopping instead of giving them my undivided attention.

At one time, Coulter worked four jobs, waking at four A.M. and falling into bed at midnight. A soccer coach would take Amos Henry and Booker to practice while she shucked oysters at a Water Valley restaurant. She once had to dash to a game in her apron and boots when the coach couldn't spot Booker on the field. She occasionally arranged sleepovers for her boys so she could pick up a more lucrative night shift. Over time, she lost the gumption to ask any more favors of her friends. These details don't make it into press releases when you win a fellowship like Coulter did.

It takes more determination to tell these stories than it does to keep smiling while we work seventy-hour weeks. When we do exchange specifics of broken marriages and mom-guilt, Coulter and I coat the conversation with nervous laughter and lots of wine. When we discuss work, we qualify every complaint with the recognition that we're luckier than most.

In Oxford, would-be servers covet positions at Ajax and Saint Leo. Both restaurants enjoy prime locations on the downtown Oxford Square. Ajax has been a mainstay for more than twenty years, drawing locals and tourists alike for meat-and-three plates, po-boys, and burgers. Three years after it opened, Saint Leo is still the shiny new kid on the block, serving wood-fired pizzas and thoughtful cocktails in a space that feels like a big-city neighborhood trattoria. Prior experience and connections in the Oxford restaurant scene helped Coulter and me secure our jobs. I learned about the opening at Saint Leo shortly after the restaurant opened through a chance conversation with beverage director Joe Stinchcomb. Coulter worked at Ajax in college, and owner Randy Yates was the best man in her wedding. When she wanted to return, he contacted her as soon as a position became available.

I split custody equally with my ex-husband, which allows me to work the busiest night shifts and keep a day job. In an SEC college town, most restaurants require employees to work during home football games, festivals, college graduation, and holidays like Easter and Mother's Day. Emily Blount, who owns Saint Leo, makes it a priority to accommodate time-off requests, even on these high-volume weekends. Though I've taken weeks away from the restaurant at times, Emily keeps me on the employee roster.

Randy lauds the mothers he employs (there are nearly a dozen on the Ajax payroll, about half of them single moms) as his most diligent and reliable employees. He dotes on their children and considers them part of the Ajax family. The kids do homework in the booths while their mothers finish lunch shifts. The young ones earn a "Butter Bean Team" T-shirt when they try their first vegetable at his restaurant. Moms keep photos of their children in the wait station. This spring, Randy canceled Ajax's Easter Sunday brunch service when he realized several of the mothers he had scheduled were scrambling, unsuccessfully, to find replacements that day.

I'd rather celebrate employers like Emily and Randy than highlight the complexities single mothers like me navigate in the service industry. Maybe it was the industry that taught me never to show weakness; maybe it was my family. I'm doing my best to revise the lesson before I pass it on.

I expect my children to work in the service industry at least once before they graduate from high school. I expect them to cultivate a work ethic, contribute to a team, perform under pressure, and develop empathy. I hope they'll master swan theory. If they can thrive in a restaurant, they'll always have employment options.

These skills should prepare them to face life's most daunting circumstances. But I don't want their self-worth to depend on handling those circumstances perfectly every time. I want them to know that there's no shame in struggling. It can happen to any of us.

We can advocate for compassion in the industry, noting the tangible ways employers like Randy Yates and Emily Blount support their staff. We can urge politicians to back up their "I was raised by a single mom" rhetoric with policies that benefit single parents in general. In the meantime, we can listen, and we can tell the truth about being a single mom. Even if it requires a bit of wine.

Jenna Mason is the SFA's content and media manager.

THE Chanterelle SEEKER

Whatever it is, I think he's found it

by JANISSE RAY

Photos by LYNSEY WEATHERSPOON

The eye is an organ that can be trained.

It can be taught to see whale spouts or arrowheads or lobster antennae. ¶ Passion is what trains the eye, and Ancil Jacques' passion is mushrooms. This obsession takes him deep into the wildest woods, roving his trained and hungry eyes over shadowy, undisturbed ground. ¶ Except it's not really mushrooms he's after. ¶ From the time he was a boy growing up in Dixie Union, Georgia, Ancil was looking for something more than most people look for. He sought something out beyond industry, out beyond a good lawyering job, out beyond protocol. ¶ When I met him, I thought, *Damn, I think he's found it*.

ANCIL'S A TALL GUY, ABOUT THIRTY, loose in his musculature and with his long brown hair twisted into a power-bun. He studies mushrooms, identifies them, hunts them, grows them, experiments with them. "I'm just a fungi," he'll joke. He moved to my village about six years ago when his fiancée (now wife) got a job teaching science at the middle school.

Until Ancil, I never met anybody in south Georgia who thought much about mushrooms. Sure as heck they didn't go poking around the woods for them. If they went to the woods, they wanted to come out with a big buck. Every mushroom hunter I've ever known lived somewhere else—morel-seekers in the Appalachians, friends who found chanterelles growing at Faulkner's place, and Trudy Crites in Vermont, who learned to identify mushrooms when she was a dark-haired child in Germany.

For most people, mushrooms are about food. For Ancil, they are about freedom.

ONE MORNING I hear our farm gate clang. I look out the kitchen window to see Ancil driving in. It's a Tuesday, cloudy so it seems earlier than 8:30, and cool for late July. It's going to rain, like every day for the past month. Ancil gets out of his truck, as usual in outdoor shorts, a dark tee, and all-terrain waterproof sandals. He's carrying a woven harvest basket.

I grab a pad in one hand and a pen in the other and rush out.

"Want to cruise along?" he asks. I have never seen him anything but upbeat, eager, and buoyant.

"Finally," I say. For months I've been hankering to shadow Ancil.

A red gate leads from the yard to the cow pasture, which must be crossed to get to the woods, hemmed by live oaks.

"Foraging was badass yesterday," Ancil says. "I got twenty-four pounds of multiple species. Mostly chanterelles."

Out of the corner of my eye I see our mule, also badass, look up at the clatter of the red gate. He recognizes Ancil, no doubt. Ancil can't forage our pasture without the mule tagging him.

There are multiple species of chanterelles, Ancil tells me. All of them are golden or yellow, but on the underside of the caps, where the gills would be, some are smooth and some are ridged.

"Remind me what a gill is." The lexicon of fungi is a dark universe to me.

Ancil says gills are the diaphanous tissues on the underside of the cap, radiating out from the stalk, where spores are produced. All chanterelles have false gills, so he uses the word "ridges" instead of "gills" for them.

The mule is coming at a trot. "The two kinds of chanterelles," I say. "What's the diff?"

"Smooth, *lateritius*, are cleaner, more robust, more resilient, with shallow ridges. Little *cibarius* are soft and fragile as compared to smooth, with more defined ridges." That's the way he talks, endearingly—"little *cibarius*."

At the edge of the woods the mule catches up. Tecumseh's like a really big dog but without the love. That's how we enter the woods, a longhair with a basket looking for something that can't fill a basket, a woman who wants the story, and a disrespectful red mule.

Ancil strides past a white pop-up. "Puffball," he says. "You could eat them but I'm not gonna."

"Why not?"

"Why eat puffballs when you have

chanterelles?" He shifts the basket away from the mule.

Pretty soon we're seeing chanterelles, the smooth kind, under the draping limbs of live oak. Ancil starts picking. Tecumseh sniffs at the contents of the basket.

"How did you get going on all this?" I ask.

"Even when I was a little kid I liked mushrooms," he says. "I liked picking mushrooms and throwing them against trees. Mushrooms are pretty endlessly cool."

Mushrooms were enchanting to Ancil the boy. They appeared magically after a rain and then just as magically disappeared. They were the work of fairies, who danced around fairy rings at night. Little people used them for shelter during storms. Leprechauns slid down their caps. By the time Ancil was sixteen he had discovered psychedelic mushrooms in the countryside around Dixie Union. Or thought he had. What he really was gathering was a species of portobello, but he didn't know better at the time.

Once soon after I met Ancil I had brought up the subject of psychedelics—everybody does—and he had seemed dismissive, almost hurt. "Yeah, people always think that's what I'm after," he said.

Now we pass out of the patch of chanterelles and keep walking the fringe, just inside the woods. He's scanning the ground. Mushrooms are plentiful, but when he sees one his eyes, like a pair of lasers, register the barest flicker and race on. His eyes skim mosaics of grass and leaves and weeds. Overhead, the sun breaks though gray matter.

"Look at these cool *Boletus*," he says. I glance around for rattlesnakes before I move closer. The eye can be trained to see rattlers, too. A couple of weeks ago my daughter stepped past a six-foot rattler before she saw it.

"Can you eat *Boletus*?"

"I wouldn't."

He's heading toward a patch of slash pine between the marsh and the road. That's exactly the place the snake was spotted.

"I collected that stinkhorn one time under your pine trees. I never found the name for it."

"A new species?"

"May be."

OF ALL THE dominions of life, mushrooms have the coolest names. In the *Boletus* genus, for instance, there are shaggy-stalked, red-cracked, king. Some are named for their associated trees and among the boletes alone there are chestnut, rosy larch, bay, ash-tree. Among puffballs there are skull-shaped, gem-studded, purple-spored, orange-staining. Earthstar, dunce cap, chicken of the woods, jelly roll, pig's ears, poison pie. Purple jelly drops, stalked hairy fairy cup, swamp beacon.

THE YEAR I met him, to celebrate his birthday Ancil organized a mushroom hike, invitation only. About a dozen folks met in a clearing at Big Hammock Wildlife Management Area (WMA) in Tattnall County, Georgia. Sarah Willis, a blond

This is how we enter the woods: a longhair with a basket looking for something that can't fill a basket, a woman who wants a story, and a disrespectful red mule.

Once I could recognize chanterelles and knew enough not to confuse them with anything deadly, I was off like a cannonball.

and small-boned schoolteacher, Ancil's fiancée at the time, was there, as was his pretty, athletic mother. Ancil was born in December, when oyster mushrooms are fruiting, so he brought his camp stove and some butter.

The trail wandered off through a Pleistocene sandhill that had evolved into a deciduous forest. Problem was, between the clearing and the oysters were scores of fungi, each beautiful, mysterious, and unknown to all of us except Ancil, who knew for each a Latin binomial, a common name or two, and some stories. That walk was my real introduction to the world of mushrooms, one of the major categories of life on earth, as Ancil says. They mostly go unnoticed. That's because the majority of the mushroom world is underground in a huge mycelium network of thin threads—real, visible threads—call hyphae. Every tree has its own mycelium network and they all intermingle down there below the ground, trees talking to trees through these phone lines. The hyphae surround the tree roots, acting as root extensions, taking nourishment from the tree and obviously giving something back. The mushroom is the fruiting body, the sexual energy, of these reticulate strands.

That day in December, I didn't get very far down the trail. Our group was like a lumbering mammoth, pausing every few steps to see a new fungus—purple, polka-dotted, red, yellow-orange, black, phallic, melty, shelf-like. My kid was newly adopted and she was having a hard time and I had to turn back and leave with her. Before I split off I saw my first oyster mushroom, white as a biscuit and growing right out of an oak. I didn't get to taste it.

A few days later my husband and I went looking for oysters in our own woods, down by Slaughter Creek (named for an Indian battle, I've heard). We walked a long time, looking down for snakes among the dog hobble and bracken fern, then up for white splotches on the trees. The leaves were off the poplars and maples and some of the oaks, and their branches stuck gray and bare into the dreamy winter sky. The creek is black water, maybe ten feet wide, running through old-growth woods on its way to the Altamaha River. A brace of wood ducks startled and flew riverward and a kingfisher nattered at us. On a fallen, sodden, mossy log that crossed the creek a raccoon had left small drifts of scat.

I'm going to tell you a secret. Oyster mushrooms are not hard to find. Once you finally spot what looks like half a white sponge cake up a tree trunk, you'll see more, sometimes cascading down the bark. Sometimes they grow on fallen trees. They grow high up and they grow low down. They're named for how they look, pearly, not how they taste or smell. The books call them "choice."

That day we gathered bags full, probably ten pounds. Back home we emailed Ancil some photos.

"Jackpot!" he replied. He said to sauté a big batch in an iron skillet with butter. They'll taste light and sweet, with willowy notes. Lay out the rest under a fan and let them dry. They can be stored dehydrated.

We filled a number of gallon glass jars with dried oysters. Reconstituted, they turn rubbery and tough, but they are perfect for broths and stock.

Same with chanterelles, which flourish from June to October where we live. Once I could recognize them and knew enough not to confuse them with anything similar but deadly, I was off like a cannonball. I walk my dogs down our dirt road and come home with enough chanterelles for breakfast in my shirt. The taste is delicate and sweet, with floral notes, maybe apricot, slightly peppery.

I had lived my whole life in and out of south Georgia before I learned any of this. Without Ancil, I wouldn't have known. The woods were full of free food.

"THERE WAS A YEAR and a half when anything I had in my pocket was from foraging," Ancil says. "Now I want a walk-in coolor and a standby generator. And a full tank of gas."

To turn his hobby into a job, Ancil built a mushroom farm. He brought in a shipping container and put in shelves and air-conditioning and found a guy who would sell him grow blocks, which are squares of sterilized substrate, something like sawdust, inoculated with shiitake spores. Or oyster spores. Then he started to grow lion's mane, which is one of several mushrooms studied for health benefits. Turns out, lion's mane can actually help the brain regenerate cells. Now Ancil is experimenting with another medicinal mushroom called *Cordyceps*, used since ancient times in China and Tibet as a tonic for energy and endurance. Besides fresh mushrooms, Ancil sells mushroom salt, mushroom oil, grow-your-own kits, and mycelium-active potting soil, which is full of beneficial microorganisms.

Everybody knows Ancil as Swampy Appleseed, the mushroom guy. He gives passionate talks at libraries and at schools, showing glorious pictures of mushrooms. He sells mushrooms at the Forsyth Farmers' Market in Savannah, which he thinks of as "four hours of retail space that disappears when it rains."

He first sold mushrooms to an up-and-coming chef named Jacob Hammer. Jacob was cooking at Local 11ten in Savannah when Ancil decided to pay him a visit. Jacob recognized what Ancil had, and he didn't haggle.

Now, Ancil likes going into Husk in Savannah, where a chalkboard list of sources proclaims "Swampy Appleseed" as the provenance of the mushrooms. "I cannot tell you how nice it is to say, *I'm a mushroom farmer*. I thought I'd be a college professor, at least a teacher. I had thought, *I'll teach kids how to read*. But I'm not nearly as passionate about anything as mushrooms.

"Mushrooms allow me to live my life on my own terms. They are my ticket to freedom. Mushrooms give me independence. I don't have to succumb to a nine-to-five job. Mushrooms allow me to hang out in the woods."

HUMAN ACTIVITIES LIKE road-building and plowing and logging damage the vast underground networks of mycelium. So to find great mushrooms, you need old trees and big wild places. Our pasture is not productive enough because a hellishness of chemicals got dumped on it before we came along. I asked Ancil if I could go with him on a serious forage.

We returned to the WMA because Ancil didn't want to show me where he usually forages, hundreds of acres of private land on which he has permission to hunt. The regulations say we can gather mushrooms here for our own use.

It's August and Big Hammock is steamy. I'm riding shotgun. We pass the firing range and the parking lot that shapeshifts into a huge encampment the night before deer season, and the boat landing on the Altamaha River. Side roads have names like "Carter Wild Cow Road" and are posted with signs that read FOOT TRAVEL INVITED.

Up ahead a huge black boar arches into the roadway.

Ancil starts talking about being in the swamp during chanterelle season. "I spend thirty to forty hours a week here. It's a great place to work. But there can be some real-life trouble." Once a tree crashed across an access road after Ancil had gone in and he had to call emergency rescue to chainsaw him out.

"That's probably the biggest danger," Ancil says. "Widowmakers fall all the time. I'm just hoping never to be under one."

We have been driving slowly along a two-track road for over five miles, parallel but out of sight of the river. We're in a vast floodplain, matted dark-brown leaves piling year after year on the ground, wet slicks in places, sunny sweeps of grass, cross vine and goldenrod. Watermarks from past floods girdle the gray bark of trees. The entire time, the chanterelle-seeker has been scrutinizing the forest floor. Finally, he parks.

"We have a good little vein here," he says, handing me a basket.

I haven't seen anything yet, and six hours later I'm only beginning to spot patches of the fleshy, orange, flowerlike mushrooms that have squeezed from underground since the last rain and that will be gone in a week. They look like orange chalices, vase-shaped or sunken, a few drops of rain in their indentations.

"Every patch is beautiful and different in its own right," says Ancil.

Following a rain two days ago, the young, called buttons, are springing up, knobby and contorted. They open into twisted urns that are firm and delicious for a couple of days until they begin to sag and fade. Ancil is seeking the *cibarius* (technically, from the *cibarius* group) and also the younger specimens—"better shelf-life, better food." He concentrates on a forest floor that is platinum-brown from weeks underwater.

The object of foraging is to cover ground. "I do lots of zigzagging." He says if you avoid spiders you add hours of travel time to your hike, since Georgia woods teem with spiderwebs in late summer. When Ancil comes upon a web, he rips down one foundation strand, never the whole thing, just enough to pass. Today I notice how the orbs are like mycelium in how ubiquitous they are, how they appear and disappear, how they feed something.

I'm hounding him, a few steps behind. Ancil has loaned me a shank made from a railroad spike and I'm clipping too, trying to keep dirt and duff out of my basket. I watch what he takes, trying to figure out why he chooses one mushroom over another. For me shelf-life doesn't matter. By afternoon I'll have these home. I plan to sauté some to freeze and also to dehydrate some for bone broths. Maybe I'll try pickling a few.

For most people, mushrooms are about food. For Ancil, they are about freedom. "I'm not as passionate about anything as mushrooms."

A red-shouldered hawk files a report with the other hawks, charging us with trespass. Ahead Ancil spots a white mushroom called a mock oyster. "But it can't be confused on a plate," he says.

Real oysters are tender, not tough.

He shows me a bright-golden-yellow, drippy, slimy fungus growing on a fallen branch. He calls it *tremella*—witch's butter—and says it can be eaten raw, which I do, peeling it off like it's a slug. It tastes earthy, oaky, with wheaty notes. It's very chewy. In the distance a rain crow plays its clackers.

As he describes it, Ancil had a storybook childhood, wanting to have fun but also to see deeply and to find meaning and have things make sense without getting too bent by them. I ask about Dixie Union. "When I was little, nothing was there," he says. "We had gorgeous land, bluejack and live oak along Dryden Creek. The woods were this thing to do. When US 1 was four-laned, a gas station came along. Now there's a Dollar General." He says that even in Dixie Union a gang, the Dub, was operating, low-grade but dangerous. When he was thirteen, a kid about fifteen offered him meth. "I'm sure his life's gone in a different direction," he says.

Somewhere close by a limb cracks and smashes down.

"Looky here!" crows Ancil. "A honey mushroom." A pitted, inky cap perches atop a thick stalk. Ancil says it's edible, but he keeps moving. He's after *cibarius*. "If it's not orange, fuck it!" is actually what he says. I clip the honey and put it in my shirt pocket, stand up and take a spider web to the face.

Ancil walks a few steps into another thick patch of *cibarius*. One is poking out from a pile of washed-up debris. "I'll leave that one for the snakes," he jokes. Snakes don't eat mushrooms, but they certainly hide in debris. I'm realizing that foraging demands a mental energy I hadn't considered. Ancil agrees. "You're looking for yellow chanterelles and black bands of snakes. You're scanning for wild hogs and checking the trees for widow-makers. You're trying to stay oriented." He goes home tired but also not tired, he says, psyched by his great luck in life and by the pounds of loot that explode out of the ground, that need no cultivation, that are free for the taking and precious in the marketplace.

ANCIL STRAIGHTENS. "Where's our road?" It really is a question.

I twirl. The trunks of trees grow tall in the dim and lonesome woods in every direction of the compass. I feel as if I've been playing that kids' game where you close your eyes while a friend spins you. When the whirling stops, you stumble around trying to stay standing and figure out where you are.

Ancil talks to me about how lost a person can get, looping in circles while foraging, avoiding webs, slapping bugs. The swamp is a crazy labyrinth. Often he uses a map app on his cell phone, dropping a pin on his truck when he leaves it and consulting his phone when he needs to load up. Surprisingly the reception is usually pretty good. When it's not, he hopes to hear a gun at the firing range or a boat on the water. Luckily Swampy Appleseed has a great sense of direction. After we've emptied our baskets once and gone back in, after we've knitted our way deep into the woods, skirting sloughs, he predicts we are near the river. He drags out his phone and locates the Altamaha a couple hundred feet away. It can't be seen for tree cover.

"I've always experienced the woods, out hiking. But the woods are different now."

"How so?"

"I'm less wary, for one thing." He pronounces it "weary."

"Of what?"

"Pigs and snakes." But there's something else he's trying to say. "I'm comfortable in the woods now. I'm part of them." He keeps talking. "This is where I work. A lot of people confuse stress with work. There's nothing unwholesome about this. It's fun, unique, attractive, hyper-local. I really enjoy it."

"Most of us are disassociated from the natural world," he says. "What happens with mushrooms is that you reconnect to the world and you realize, *Everything's connected*. You go around looking at things, saying, *Look at this, this is part of the world*."

On the way back to the truck he steps over a beautiful white rosette, edged in gray. "Look at this *Spongipellis*," he says.

There's another world. Most people won't see it. It's underground and aboveground, fantastical and multicolored, intimate and honest.

"Melt my heart." As we pass a tree he spots *volvariella* emerging from bark, with a light pink, vulva-like veil. He points out *Xylaria*, dead man's fingers, a club mushroom that liberates its spores when thumped, a gust of smoke along a rotting log. He almost takes a reishi, a common shelf fungus that gets hard as clay, but decides it's too old. Reishi, used as an antioxidant and a boost to the immune system, was one of the first mushrooms Ancil foraged. His folks add it to their coffee.

When he's alone in the woods, Ancil tells me, he sings songs and babbles to the barred owls. "It's nice to have you along," he says to me. Through the woods, the cicadas drone as if they are meditating.

When we return to the clearing a wildlife officer is waiting, his DNR truck blocking both of our vehicles. I'm sure he thinks it's a drug deal.

I walk to my car and pile my things on the trunk: notepad, camera, large bag of chanterelles. The officer is early thirties, in a uniform with a nametag, armed.

He asks us how we're doing and then *what* we're doing. I point to the mushrooms, visible through the bag. I'm so excited I'm kind of bubbling, like a shook-up bottle of club soda. Does the man realize that there are thousands of pounds of edible mushrooms scattered across the forest floor, throughout Georgia, and most people don't know a *thing* about them?

"I don't eat mushrooms," the officer says. His dark hair is already thinning, but for now he is young and fit and cautious, even dangerous.

"Well," Ancil says. Stops. There is so much to say.

Instead, I do the thing all Southerners used to do, which is to ask him where he's from, which is where Ancil's wife is from, and he knows her, and he lives where I'm from, and we know some of the same people, and after a while he knows we're okay people, not running drugs, and he climbs back in his truck and eases on down toward the river, probably to check fishing licenses.

Ancil's not always working the woods. He combs pecan orchards, too, gathering truffles. These little doubloons suddenly materialize under pecan trees, less pungent than their European counterparts but still odiferous enough to stimulate the sense of smell and taste, and with some other witchy, earthy, almost supernatural quality. Ancil's definitely not taking anybody into the orchards with him because pecan truffles command the big bucks. He ships them out to New York, and if there are extras, he makes truffle salt and truffle oil.

And again, I think that, finding truffles, Ancil has found something else, some amorphous spiritual thing that allows him to keep believing in goodness, believing in the natural world even with horrors like climate disruption, believing in people. Because there's another world. Most people won't see it. It's underground and aboveground, it's fantastical and multicolored, it's intimate and honest, it's forgiving. It's playful and poky and powerful. Call it whatever you want.

Ancil knows he wouldn't have found this working in the lumber section of the building-supply store.

Of course, science keeps probing the universe, other planets, the black holes of our minds, our complicated bodies, ecosystems, the center of the Earth, the oceans. We search for life on Mars, for a cure for Alzheimer's, for unheard-of species, for the tricks of DNA. Even so, there remains some mystery we can't touch, can't recreate, can't explain. And surely, in that place, we find the most profound truths of all.

In the magical realism of the book *Like Water for Chocolate*, food is infused with the emotions that surround it. A wedding cake prepared while crying turns everybody sad. I think of that now. When you eat Ancil's chanterelles, you get Ancil's joy and his gratitude, his effervescence. You get the knowledge that everything is connected to everything else and that you're a part of it. And you get the place, too—the terroir. You get the enchantment of a great serpentine expanse of blackwater floodplain, threaded with cypress sloughs and decades of organic matter from which crazily beautiful and puzzling things emerge. You get the falcate moon in a brilliant blue sky and the vivid greens of leaves, dramatic and flamboyant. You get spider lily. You get the nobility of owls and the enigma of yellow-billed cuckoos, cagey woods in all directions and nobody for miles. You get a wild boar crashing away and adorable wild piglets that halt and watch.

You get a place deep in the Georgia jungle that is covered with rainwater months of the year, and you also get an immense underground forest, an endless untrammeled network of fine lines that connect everything above with everything below. You get a world you will never see, threaded throughout.

Janisse Ray is the author of six books, most recently an exploration of heirloom seeds called The Seed Underground: A Growing Revolution to Save Food. *She lives on an organic farm near the confluence of the Altamaha and Ohoopee rivers in Georgia.*

Larry Geter behind the counter at Doo Dad's

Photos by André Gallant

ONE MORE FOR THE ROAD

Doo Dad's serves seafood to go and community to stay

BY ANDRÉ GALLANT

LARRY GETER COUNTS CARS. LOIS Geter counts frog legs. Each measures the pace of Friday lunch rush at Doo Dad's, the couple's roadside food stand in Woodbine, Georgia. Vehicles line the shoulder along Kinlaw Road, where a candy-striped tent sheathed in white plastic stands on the Geters' driveway. Customers wait inside their rides, doors open, listening for their orders. Under the tent, the Geters, seventy years old and married for fifty, conduct the show.

"I got him and him." Larry points at an idling pickup truck, then at a tan sedan skirting the drainage ditch. Dressed in a blue plaid shirt and black slacks, he cranes his body through the service window to assess current volume. At times, the motorcade extends from the Geters' house north to the intersection with US Highway 17, the coastal route that once defined this quiet part of northern Camden County, before an interstate bypass shuttered its gas stations and barbecue stands.

Doo Dad's catches eyes. Years ago, the Geters painted their home flamingo pink, and the glow registers all the way to the highway. They stake tall yellow flags, with red letters proclaiming SEAFOOD, along the curbs. Some days, Atlantic winds off the salt marshes ripple the flags. Others, humidity weighs them down like soaked beach towels.

Larry knows how to attract and entertain a crowd. He made a name for himself around Camden as a James Brown impersonator in the 1980s and 90s. He dressed in a white suit and black cape to strut the camel dance, funky chicken, and boogaloo at retirement homes. Larry never charged for his appearances; he calls it an honor to dress as his idol. He no longer imitates the Godfather of Soul, but he keeps laminated photos of himself in full regalia posted around Doo Dad's.

The Doo Dad's tent sits in front of the Geter home in Woodbine, GA.

Larry eyeballs a motorcycle he hasn't accounted for yet. He realizes it belongs to a leather-clad regular reclining at a picnic table. He checks the small spiral notebook he codes with initials and numerals to tally orders for oysters, pork chops, chicken livers, and pork chitterlings. He missed something. Larry calls back to Lois to drop another frog leg.

Lois tells him they're running out. Frugal with words, she lets Larry run his mouth with customers. A flour-dusted apron wraps her indigo shirt and pants, and her gaze pivots between stations. She bathes and dredges butterflied shrimp through egg wash and flour—these will become what regulars call "three-and-a-half-bite shrimp"—then plunks them into deep fryers, where cornmeal-battered conch fritters and armies of okra catch their garlicky crust.

Larry discovers a fresh bus tub of dressed legs. Minutes later, Lois answers the call: *Frog leg down!*

"Fred, we got you in the grease," Larry yells to the biker.

While the Geters planned to retire from the paper mill, they never expected to stop working. They believe in staying occupied.

The business that now thrives on the Geters' lawn developed over years. Doo Dad's began as a hobby, indulged during weekends and vacations. They catered high school football games and car shows, traveled to bike rallies as far away as Kansas City. Attendees to any public event around Camden County expected a meal prepared in the Geters' mobile kitchen. While this corner of south Georgia has weathered decades of booms and busts, the Geters and their fried fish have remained constant.

FOR YEARS, CHANGE couldn't find Camden County. Then, all of a sudden, it couldn't be stopped.

Slave labor built wealth in southeast Georgia via rice and cotton harvest. Timber and turpentine took over after the Civil War. The Gilman Paper Company opened a mill in 1941, and a smokestack skyline materialized along the North River, enveloping the region in its trademark sulfuric stank.

Larry worked at Gilman for thirty-four years. Lois worked across the state line at a mill on Amelia Island, Florida, for thirty-eight years. Just about everybody else they knew depended on mill work. Few complained, except about the smell.

Over the years, Larry learned about food and its effect on people. On the Geter family homestead, which Larry can spy from his pink front porch, his father, Robert "J" Geter, ran a fish fry-slash-juke joint in a wood-sided outbuilding. Dance tunes pulled people in from Friday night until sermons called on Sundays.

Kids fished for bream and whiting in creeks; the catch wound up in J's sandwiches. Groups boated out to barrier island beaches for "sanding" sessions, when five people worked a 100-foot seine net. They'd cast out into breaking waves and return with enough shrimp to fill bucket after bucket. A few hours' labor

produced enough to sate a neighborhood.

For most folks, these traditions—from juke dancing to sanding—remain as memories only, set adrift by the moment that revolutionized Camden County.

In 1979, the Kings Bay Naval Submarine Base opened near St. Marys. The arriving fleet of underwater warships—which brought 5,000 seamen, technicians, and their families—transformed this place. "I used to know everybody," then-Mayor Alvin Dickey told *The New York Times* that year. "Now I don't."

The population more than doubled by 1990 and grew by almost fifty percent over the next decade. Chain restaurants and mini malls filled in the roadsides between towns, and farmers let fields go fallow in favor of subdivisions. Eventually global forces came into play. A Mexican corporation bought Gilman in 1999. By 2006, bankruptcy ended Larry's run at the company, along with hundreds of others who were also laid off. Developers renovated the old mill houses; the soot disappeared from lap siding and the smell evaporated. Newly arrived naval workers bought those same houses at four times their previous value.

A cosmopolitan-country divide now defines Camden, explains Gordon Jackson, a reporter for the *Brunswick News* who's covered Camden County since the early 1990s. New transplants live in the city, while the old guard claims the countryside. On Kinlaw Road, Jackson says, longtime residents tend to resist Camden's so-called progress. They believe that preservation can guide the county forward. Not everything needs development, the argument goes. It's nice to know your neighbors. And the best food often comes from their front yards.

NOT LONG AFTER the mill closed, the Geters made their front yard a permanent post. The name they chose honors the neighborhood. On Kinlaw Road, when you spy someone you recognize, whether you know them well or not, you holler at them, "Hey, bust-eye!" or "Hey, doo-dad!" The latter sounded a little more polite. Doo Dad's became a beacon, just like J's before it.

The Geters' deep influence on Kinlaw draws people close. Old friends and relatives stop by on leisure drives, just to say hi. Younger regulars collect the pink-and-blue rubber bands that encircle Styrofoam clamshells—Larry's signal for a complete order—around their gear shifts, where they accumulate like tree rings. They mark time. And some regulars fear that's running short.

They wager that as economic development improves or demolishes—depending on whom you ask—the vestiges of small-town life in Camden County, front-yard fry shops, like the juke joints that preceded them, won't endure. The Geters' age adds to the worries that Doo Dad's may close. Nobody around here wants that to happen anytime soon.

While the Geters planned to retire from the mill, they never expected to stop working. They believe in staying occupied. "You're going to get old one day, and you're going to need something to carry you on," Larry says. In other words: Find your Doo Dad's.

A recent scare put this counsel to the test. In 2017, during an event in Orlando, Larry cut himself while repairing a trailer tire and developed a staph infection. The bacteria spread through his body. He lost consciousness. "I didn't know nobody for three days," he recalls. He closed Doo Dad's for a year while he recovered. When he reopened the tent in the spring of 2018, traffic backedup Kinlaw Road. Today, the trauma lingers—Larry walks with a cane when not in the kitchen and takes breaks on a wooden stool by the register. But when the next customer drives up to nab a whiting plate, Larry springs to the ready.

ABOVE: Lois Geter scoops shrimp through egg wash and a flour dredge. OPPOSITE: A photo of Larry Geter dressed as James Brown is pinned among newspaper clippings about his performances.

TOWARD THE END of the lunch rush, Lois shakes bronzed shrimp from a fry basket into a clamshell. She adds conch fritters to the mix, and a condiment cup of her creamy hot sauce.

Larry tucks in a scoop of french fries, closes the lid, and looks for the person who ordered them. He grabs a referee whistle and leans out the tent; he locates his target across the street and gives the whistle a blast.

"Tan sedan! Your food is ready!"

Tickets cleared, Larry and Lois walk back to the house to sit a spell. Their respite won't last. Car tires crunch pebbles in the driveway and a horn toot draws the Geters back to the kitchen. From there, they oversee Kinlaw Road, the place they call home.

André Gallant is a journalist based in Athens, Georgia, and the author of A High Low Tide: The Revival of a Southern Oyster *from the University of Georgia Press. Learn more at www.andre-gallant.com.*

E IS FOR ENTERTAINMENT

From mini golf to mermaids

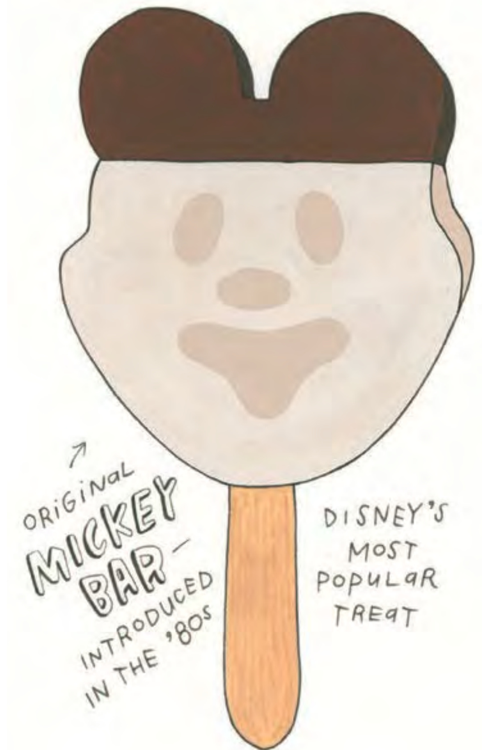
BY EMILY WALLACE

Illustrations by Emily Wallace

BEFORE BED EACH NIGHT, RANDY Koplin wandered between dinosaur legs and wished a Sphinx sweet dreams. His family's house was situated on the edge of a miniature golf course on Florida's Miracle Strip, where his father Lee perfected the art of constructing giant cement sculptures in the 1950s. Located across the street from the Panama City Beach pier, Goofy Golf's towering monkey and wide-mouthed fish invited tourists—especially kids and their parents—over for an hour of sport and strange sightseeing with the explicit goal of having fun.

It was the height of roadside prosperity, and all that was weird or wonderful was there to entertain—and, for locals, to make money. As historian Tracy Revels puts it in *Sunshine Paradise*, "Anyone with a collection of American Indian artifacts, a large garden, or an exotic animal could put up a billboard and charge admission." In Iowa, George Kern reportedly lured visitors to his country store with little more than the promise of a petrified ham. And as an attraction in Florida, residents marketed droopy, pod-filled *Kigelia africana* plants as bountiful "sausage trees." Across the Sunshine State, mom-and-pop road stops became so abundant that the Florida Attractions Association formed in 1949 to offer legitimacy, placing FAA emblems at approved venues.

Like Koplin's alien Cyclops at Goofy Golf, Florida's attractions could seem otherworldly. But they were grounded in a tradition of tourism and self-promotion that included St. Augustine's health spas of the late 1800s and Jacksonville's early amusement parks, including the Ostrich Farm, which began racing birds for spectacle in 1898. Overwhelmingly, these parks operated as whites-only venues, sometimes hosting so-called Jim Crow Days. As scholar Lauren Rabinovitz details in *Electric Dreamland*, African American residents in the North and South responded by establishing black-owned entertainment centers, like Jacksonville's Lincoln Park, "ensur[ing they] were not excluded from the form of urban leisure that was being ushered in by modernity." Similar to white parks, black venues were also often located at the end of public transit lines and featured the latest rides, games, and concessions.



The national appeal for amusement only increased after World War II, when Americans found themselves with more free time and money. For many, the idea of vacations became an entrenched part of the American Dream, as did, in October 1971, a certain mouse. In Orlando, Disney World harnessed the celebrity of its characters to become the ultimate all-inone vacation spot. For an average of $33 a day, a family of four could do it all—smile with Snow White, twirl in one of the Mad

Hatter's spinning cups, and down a couple of ice cream cones. And they could do it all year round. Walt Disney chose Florida to house the offshoot of his California park because of its temperate climate, as well as its accessibility by car (the construction of new roads made this even more of a reality). In addition, it was home to undeveloped swaths of land—enough room to build Cinderella's castle.

Disney's West and East Coast parks inspired several southerners to expand their visions, or to create something new entirely. In Arlington, Texas, Angus Wynne founded Six Flags in 1961, with the belief that regional parks would be more accessible and affordable for Texans wishing to be entertained. The first spin-off was Six Flags Over Georgia, which opened in 1967. And in the Tennessee mountains, Dolly Parton also dreamt of creating something with local appeal. "I've always joked that I want to be a female Walt Disney," Parton once said of the inspiration for Dollywood. "In my early days, I thought if I do get successful, I want to come back here and build something special to honor my parents and my people." In addition to offering concessions and rides, Dollywood promotes traditional Appalachian music and crafts.

> "Anyone with a collection of American Indian artifacts, a large garden, or an exotic animal could put up a billboard and charge admission."

Still, Florida leads the way with attractions, counting some of America's largest and most popular parks—Busch Gardens, SeaWorld, Legoland, and Universal Orlando—among them. As singular destinations shaped by big budgets, such venues helped usher out many of the early roadside stops, which were more often happened upon on meandering drives. Also contributing to the demise of smaller places was the growth of interstate highways, which passed them by entirely. Those that remain, Revels argues, "convey a 'surprising charm and beauty.'" Across Florida, the jagged-tooth entryway to Gatorland, the teeming Citrus Tower with its panoramic view, and the Sphinx on the strip at Goofy Golf endure as incentives to pull over. And they still entertain.

WEEKI WACHEE SPRINGS
Weeki Wachee, Florida

As I step out of the air-conditioned snack bar at Weeki Wachee Springs, the Florida heat fogs my glasses. The high is 91, the humidity even higher. But when I find Victoria Cox at the edge of Buccaneer Bay, a crystal blue swimming hole, she's shivering in a navy sweat suit, MERMAID printed in white letters across her chest and thigh.

Thirty minutes earlier, Cox was performing in a sequined top and Lycra tail some sixteen feet below the surface as one of the sisters in Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*. It was admittedly a bit cheesy. A blue satin curtain lifted to reveal young women (plus one man and a costumed sea turtle, the

In Florida today, the jagged-tooth entryway to Gatorland, the Citrus Tower, and the Sphinx on the strip at Goofy Golf endure. And they still entertain.

beloved Chester) lip-synching to steel-drum tunes in an underwater theater carved into the spring's limestone walls. But the routine was nothing short of impressive—the synchronized swimming, the wrangling of air hoses for breathing, the eyes wide open with no goggles, the fish and manatees that sometimes swim into the "stage," and the current that runs a swift five miles per hour. For Cox, the challenge is diving into the 74-degree water. "You really have to love the job because you'll freeze your butt off," she says.

Weeki Wachee is one of the deepest natural springs in the nation—a network of caverns where rock bottom has reportedly never been reached. Newton Perry, who trained the elite Navy frogmen (a precursor to the SEALs) to work underwater in World War II, staked out the overgrown spot in 1946 as a potential tourist site. Having developed a canister-less oxygen hose that divers didn't have to strap on their backs, he moved on to recruiting young women to swim and dance in the cool water. The first show opened to an eighteen-seat theatre in 1947. To attract visitors, the mermaids stood in their bathing suits along US 19, waved down cars, and then dove into the spring to do their twirls and tricks. A classic, which is still performed, involves eating a banana and having a drink underwater—originally Arkansas's Grapette soda, its bright plum hue easily visible to onlookers in the theater. (Today, the mermaids drink colored water in plastic Coke bottles as part of their performance.)

In 1959, the American Broadcasting Company bought Weeki Wachee's theater, bolstering the show's theatrics and constructing the current four-hundred-seat space. And in 2008, Weeki Wachee became an official Florida-owned park, meaning mermaids are now state employees. Women travel from all over to audition, including Cox, who drove three times from North Carolina to Florida to try out before finally snagging the job. "Basically, it was the universe telling me I had to graduate college first," she says.

Cox uses her degree in costume design from the University of North Carolina School of the Arts to make crowns and tails. Her goal is to one day open a mermaid school—one that will be about more than entertainment. The idea is that children relate to mermaids more easily than they do to water-related issues like sea-level rise or sustainable seafood. At Weeki Wachee, they clap and sing along, mesmerized by the underwater swimmers.

"We're not like other women fighting traffic on the shore," the mermaids sing in one number, "tired of going shopping, living lives that are a bore." Cox puts it differently while finishing her lunch between shows. "I don't just want to be a pretty face or a Barbie," she says. "I want to do something."

Excerpted from *Road Sides: An Illustrated Companion to Dining and Driving in the American South* by Emily Wallace, © 2019, published with permission from the University of Texas Press. *Road Sides* will be available October 1.

FALL SYMPOSIUM

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FEATURING

Kiese Laymon
writer

Regina Bradley
writer/scholar

Edouardo Jordan
chef

TICKETS GO ON SALE AUGUST 1

Glazed ducks at Tang's Asian Market;
RIGHT: Bindu Sreepathy in World Food Mart

Ava Lowrey

EAST BY NORTHWEST

Asian communities flavor Arkansas foodways

BY ANNEMARIE ANDERSON AND AVA LOWREY

Brian Chilson

OFTEN DOCUMENTARY FIELDWORK can be a lonely experience. As much as documentarians spend our days connecting with people and chasing the social and professional high of a great interview, we often end our nights alone in a hotel room with field notes, takeout, and occasionally a glass of wine in a plastic cup.

This trip was different. We set out together to create a larger collaborative project about the immigrant foodways that have shaped northwest Arkansas. In preparation for our Summer Field Trip to Bentonville, Arkansas, we talked with locals and explored the surprisingly diverse food community of the Bentonville-Springdale metro area. We visited Asian markets, Indian restaurants, and a halal butcher shop.

When Tom and Anna Tang moved to northwest Arkansas in the 1980s, there were few Asian-owned businesses and no Asian grocery stores. Using family recipes, the Tangs opened the first Chinese restaurant in the town of Siloam Springs, about thirty miles from Bentonville. New China was the first of several successful Tang family businesses centered around Chinese food.

Much has changed since the Tangs opened their first business. Tom and Anna Tang retired shortly before their daughter, Shu Lan Tang, and her husband, Bryan Winzer, moved back from a brief stint living in Japan and Hong Kong. Upon their return to Arkansas, Shu Lan and Bryan faced down the reality of a two-hour drive to Tulsa, Oklahoma, for ingredients and dining experiences they had grown accustomed to easily acquiring in Japan and Hong Kong. They longed for restaurants that served dim sum or char siu and grocery stores that stocked umeboshi.

Shu Lan saw an opportunity and opened Tang's Asian Market in 2013. It was one of the first East Asian markets in northwest Arkansas. In addition to specialty groceries, the market serves prepared deli goods and boxed lunches—duck, char siu pork, or pork belly. Shu Lan's father, Tom Tang, roasts the beautifully glazed ducks that hang from the meat counter.

Like the Tangs, Bindu Sreepathy and her husband, Raja Bavirisetti, confronted the hardships of finding familiar food in northwest Arkansas. Today, they own Flavors Indian Cuisine, Kwality Ice Cream and Grill, and World Food Mart

grocery store in Bentonville. When they moved to town in 2009, Indian grocery staples were hard to find.

Originally from the state of Andhra Pradesh in Southern India, Bindu had moved to Houston, Texas, with Raja when they were married in 2007. It was easy to source Indian ingredients in Houston. "I never felt that I was not in India when I was living in Houston," she said. "But when I came [to Bentonville], that's when I realized it's not."

Bindu learned to adapt the recipes she knew. When she couldn't find bitter melon or snake gourd, she made curries out of celery. She used seasonal vegetables from

Shu Lan Tang, owner of Tang's Asian Market

the Bentonville farmers' market and experimented with vegetables from the Walmart produce section.

In 2011, Raja decided to go into business. They opened their first restaurant, Taj Indian Cuisine, with partners on Walton Boulevard, right beside Walmart Headquarters. That restaurant morphed into Flavors Indian Cuisine. In 2015, Bindu and Raja opened a grocery store, World Food Mart.

When World Food Mart opened, it sold Indian products. Gradually, they added goods from Latin America and the Middle East. "This town is not just Indians. It's everybody," remarked Bindu. "So, when we have so much ethnicity, why just restrict ourselves to one community?" Today, bags of mustard seeds sit beside La Costenita brand dried chiles. Customers fill their baskets with Maggi masala noodles and rose syrup.

As World Food Mart and Tang's Asian Market show, immigrant-owned restaurants and groceries are a nexus for the many immigrant communities who now call northwest Arkansas home. In all of these spaces, from the Salvadoran tiendas to Tang's Asian Market in Springdale, you will also find white Arkansans enjoying pork buns and pupusas. Have lunch at Flavors on a weekday, and you might sit by Walmart employees on their lunch break, chatting over bowls of sambar or plates of butter chicken. For many, these places are glimmers of familiarity in a new landscape, and they broaden the definition of Southern food. As we wrap up Arkansas field work, these spaces—and the foods, aromas, people, and stories that fill them—make us hopeful. And hungry.

Annemarie Anderson is SFA's oral historian. Ava Lowrey is SFA's Pihakis documentary filmmaker.

Ava Lowrey

WITH DRAWL

Don't miss out on *Southern Cultures* quarterly. Subscribe now to accent your reading with smart southern voices. Visit **SouthernCultures.org/25** to subscribe or give a gift. Order now and receive a free 25th anniversary tote bag.

Illustrations by Elizabeth Graeber

GLORY IN A CAN

It's not so easy packing greens

BY SARAH E. WHITE

Illustration by Lindsey Bailey

BILL WILLIAMS, A CIA-EDUCATED African American chef and entrepreneur with roots in Shorterville, Alabama, was living in Columbus, Ohio, in the 1980s when he noticed something missing from the shelves of local grocery stores. Unlike Goya, which offered Latin American pantry staples, Williams realized that there was no brand built around the regional tastes of Southerners. Surely there was a market for canned versions of the Southern staples he grew up on—his mother's collard greens, for instance. Williams brought the idea to his friend Dan Charna, a food-service professional from Cleveland, and the two became partners. Williams' business partner Garth Henley of Columbus came on as an investor. Iris Cooper soon joined the team as a marketer, proposing the name "Glory Foods" for the new enterprise.

Charna and Williams approached Kroger in Columbus about carrying their Southern-style product line. It would include canned field peas, boxed cornbread mix, and hot sauce. Seasoned collards greens would be the flagship product.

Glory's founders knew it was futile to compete for a place on the Sunday dinner table. Homemade, slow-cooked, seasoned collard greens were sacred to families with roots in the South. But the partners saw an opportunity to replicate home-cooked greens in a can, stewed and seasoned for weeknight convenience. Turns out, the textures and flavors that made homemade greens shine weren't easy to package. Here's a step-by-step look at their first run.

STEP 1

Find a cannery

Charna and Williams traveled to Effingham, South Carolina, to meet with

brothers Henry Swink and Marion Swink, owners of McCall Farms. What they found there resembled a Rube Goldberg contraption in a bat cave. Sunlight pierced the gloom to glint off the steel cookers. Sweating workers moved to the music of the rattling conveyor belts, the clanging pressure cookers, and the hissing steam escaping from the huge retorts. The sulfurous funk of cooked vegetables hung in the air. On the day Williams and Charna visited, McCall Farms was canning for a regional brand called Margaret Holmes. McCall Farms was the only co-packer who had returned their calls, and now the Swinks promised they could provide whatever Glory Foods needed to get greens harvested and canned.

Glory Foods contracted with McCall Farms to source the greens and can them according to the recipes Charna and Williams had created. When the collard crop came ready for harvest in the spring of 1992, Williams and Cooper stayed in Columbus to plot a sales strategy while Charna and Henley returned to Effingham for Glory Foods' first run at canning greens.

STEP 2

Cut: Not too high, not too low

The quality of a harvest determines the quality in the can. Charna supervised the farmer cutting the crop to ensure it met the leaf-to-stem ratio the recipe specified. Crops grow to different heights depending on microconditions in the field. Cut too high and you get an excellent ratio of leaf to stem, but the farmer loses money because less weight is generated. Cut too low and not only do you get more stem, you get more of any foreign material in the field. Frogs, insects, trash thrown from passing cars—if it's in the field, it gets harvested.

That first day, the heat out in the open fields was intense. Charna wasn't used to it. Sweat rolled down his body in rivers as he rode the cutter behind the farmer driving the tractor.

Charna was supposed to tell the farmer when to raise or lower the straight blade of the cutter based on the height of the plants and the roll of the field, to maintain an even ratio of leaf to stem among all the greens going into the bin. At first, Charna couldn't understand the farmer's accent; eventually, the two men developed hand signals to communicate.

STEP 3

Can "wet newspaper"

Trucks of harvested greens sped from the field to the McCall Farms receiving dock, where they were weighed. Workers forked greens from truck beds onto a conveyer belt of quarter-inch mesh designed to remove debris.

The greens moved from the reel to steam blanchers to get the air out and bring them up to canning temperature—hot, but still raw. A quality control team eyeballed them for any obvious contamination before they moved to a chopper to be cut into roughly two-inch squares. During recipe development, Williams had determined that the size of the chop would make Glory Foods collard greens seem homestyle rather than factory-produced.

Steamed greens have the consistency of wet newspaper. Peas and beans roll, but hands keep blanched greens from sticking in clumps and falling unevenly into the cans. Getting the right fill weight on each can was difficult. Either they were too heavy because a worker was pushing the greens into the can as it went down the line, or they were too light because someone was taking greens off the top to make sure there was headspace in the can, which is essential for pressure cooking.

Worse, greens chopped to that two-inch spec were prone to slopping over the rims of the cans. That caused problems when the cans met the closing machine. A can might look fine, but a tiny flaw in that seam where greens hung over the rim made that can a breeding ground for post-process contamination. In a few days, it would explode. One exploding can might cause its neighbors to erupt. The chain reaction could wipe out whole pallets of product.

STEP 4

Spice it right

Getting the right amount of blanched collards to enter the can cleanly was half the battle. The other half was portioning the spice mixture. This was crucial to delivering a consistent Glory Foods product.

While Charna rode the cutter in the field, Marion Swink stationed Henley at the mouth of the vibrating conveyor trough to monitor the blend. He could speed up or slow down the vibration of the trough to get the right amount of seasonings in each can.

A canning plant is a humid environment. Salt is hygroscopic, meaning that it attracts water from the atmosphere. In the steamy cannery, that salty spice mix clumped around the mouth of the dispenser. Some cans got none, some got the proper measure, and some a massive lump.

It was Henley's job to grab over-filled or under-filled cans off the line. The cans' mouths were as sharp as razor blades. It felt like 120 degrees in that plant; soon his hands were cut to ribbons and stinging from his sweat and the spice mix. There were pools of watery collard soup at his feet, run-off from the blanching process and the over-filled cans. Every time he touched the conveyor, he received an electrical shock.

STEP 5

Cool it (and store it, and move it)

After the cans were filled, they were loaded into retorts and cooked under pressure. Workers opened a sample can every hour to test that nothing had gone wrong with the process. Finally, cans were cooled by submersion in cold, chlorinated water. In under twelve hours, the vegetables made it from the field to the storage bays. Day by day, the warehouse filled with pallets of Glory greens.

With time, the Swink brothers and Charna solved the two production challenges. To avoid the clumping spices, McCall Farms began using seasoned brine in place of the powdered spice mix. To stop the "wet newspaper" ruining the seal of the cans, McCall Farms switched to a larger can size, which gave a larger target to fill. Williams came up with the perfect explanation for the grocers: "The cans are family-sized. When you make greens, you don't make a little, you make a mess of them. It should be the same whether they come from your garden or from a can." The grocery stores bought it, and so did customers.

"Tuesday Greens" today

Glory Foods began on McCall Farms. Today, McCall owns Glory. Its canning operation consists of miles of gleaming steel in a state-of-the-art facility. And you can still find those collards—in mess-of-greens-sized cans—on grocery shelves far and wide.

Sarah E. White, a Wisconsin native, is at work on a history of Glory Foods.

BISCUITS THAT NEVER WERE

Memory and myth, in the kitchen and on the page

BY CALEB JOHNSON

Photos by Jamie Sumague

WHEN I WAS TWENTY-FIVE YEARS old, I packed what I could fit in my two-door Honda Accord and drove west to attend graduate school in Laramie. I'd rented a second-story apartment, sight unseen, near the University of Wyoming campus. I had never lived outside of Alabama. I was not a young Southerner who longed to get far away, though in fact that's what I'd done. The South had been good to me, and I intended to write a novel set there and firmly rooted in its literary traditions.

I'd become interested in Hernando de Soto's conquest of the region, which began in 1539 when ten ships carrying more than 600 men landed somewhere near modern-day Tampa Bay. For the next three years, the Spaniards moved inland, killing and enslaving thousands of Native Americans along the way. In addition to violence and pestilence, according to some historians, the de Soto caravan brought the first peaches to North America. I was surprised to learn this. Every summer my family drove through Chilton County, Alabama, the heart of our state's peach-growing region, on the way to the Gulf Coast. We bought baskets of ripe fruit at roadside stands and ate them on the beach, tossing sticky pits into the surf. On the way back north, we bought more and ate the juicy peaches while leaning over the kitchen sink so as not to stain our clothes. Peaches were so synonymous with my childhood in Alabama I assumed they were a native fruit.

After less than two months living on the high plains, I was desperate for home. This desperation drove me to the kitchen, which had an ancient gas range with an oven so small the one baking sheet I owned wouldn't fit. The previous tenant had created additional counter space by placing a piece of plywood atop cinder blocks. The sink was deep enough that I could, in an act of full-on bachelorhood, let dirty dishes pile up for days.

I drove across town to the Walmart, which, it's worth noting, has the best view of any Walmart store in the country. From the parking lot, I could see thirty miles clear to the Snowy Range's quartzite peaks, capped with snow in late July. I pushed an empty cart toward the baking aisle. I'd decided to make biscuits from

scratch. It seemed like something I ought to know how to do—like changing the oil in a car or knotting a tie. Decades after my grandfather died of leukemia, my mother still judges biscuits against his catheads. I used to think the term had something to do with catfish, because in the memories I have of my grandfather, he sits on an overturned five-gallon

bucket with a fishing rod in his hands.

Biscuit-making promises to be simple: It requires flour, fat, and something wet to bind the dough. On the drive back to my apartment, I called my mother to ask if she remembered how her father made biscuits. She'd often watched him mix and bake. But by the time I was born, she had given up trying to recreate his biscuits from memory. Instead she bought bags of frozen pre-cut dough and threw discs in the oven on Sunday mornings before church. While they baked, she would whip up a chocolate gravy so sweet my teeth ache recalling it. All she could tell me about my grandfather's biscuits was that he poured beer into the dry mix, rolled the tacky dough into a log, then pinched off hunks he shaped by hand. Hardly enough for a novice baker to go on.

I no longer remember the recipe I used for my first attempt. I now know that oven did not warm anywhere near the temperature set by the delicate twist of a loose knob. Nor did I take into account Laramie's elevation: 7,200 feet above sea level. My miscalculations caused those biscuits to come out as flat as the prairie at the edge of town. I broke one in half, slathered on butter and blackberry jelly. Nothing could redeem them. I stood in the kitchen and choked one down, the experience akin to eating a mouthful of sawdust. The rest I threw in the trash.

Looking back, I could've saved myself trouble by doing a little research. But I don't have much patience for that, a truth that would emerge as the novel I was writing evolved from a fictional retelling of history to a mythical reimagining of a time and place.

THE STORY OF de Soto's conquest in the South appealed to me as a first-time novelist because it provided a sturdy narrative backbone. More or less, I had a beginning, a middle, and an end. I started composing. Every sentence felt like scaling a wall. Once over the top, another stood in my way. I had no idea what conquistadors wore, what supplies they carried, how their weapons worked, what the various tribes of Native Americans the Spanish encountered looked like, or how they lived. Any bit of narrative I managed to string together seemed lifeless when I read back over it later in the day. I felt burdened by fact rather than enabled by it.

Sometime after that first batch of inedible biscuits, I met Burge. He was from Mississippi, a writer and musician. One night Burge invited me over to watch a college football game. He cooked turnips and rich, tender greens and made drop biscuits.

Burge was a fisherman and a hunter, too. I hadn't done much of either since I was a kid, but suddenly, removed from those memories, I longed to again. So Burge patiently gave me fly-fishing lessons and took me bird hunting with his dog, Boot. I'll never forget hiking in freezing dark to a flooded river and waiting among weed cover for the sun to crest the hills at our backs. Decoys bobbing, ducks diving in, I no longer felt so desperate for home.

Around this same time, I was given a copy of Donald Link's *Real Cajun* cookbook, which includes a recipe for buttermilk biscuits. On weekends Burge would come over and I'd follow Link's directions. While the biscuits baked, Burge and I played guitar and talked about our favorite books and what we were writing. He read a draft of my novel manuscript and gave smart feedback about its voice—or lack thereof. For inspiration, he gifted me a dinner plate with a man wearing a conquistador-like gold helmet painted on it. I ate off this plate until someone asked if I knew whether it was lead-free. Now I keep it on my desk as a talisman.

Before long, I didn't need to look at Link's recipe. I worked from memory and altered things on the fly. I fiddled with the ratio of flour to butter to shortening. I worked the dough less, gently folding it so the biscuits grew tall and tilted as they cooked. I traded a sheet pan for a cast-iron skillet I let warm in the oven before packing it with raw dough. I began to write my novel this way, too, ditching a fictional retelling of de Soto's conquest for a story centered on a grandmother, Maybelle Treeborne, and her granddaughter, Janie, and set around an Alabama peach orchard. This pair was the compass I needed. They led me around a river valley that revealed itself further each time I sat down at a wall-facing desk more than a thousand miles from my home.

Often I start writing fiction with an image in mind. I remember seeing Maybelle and Janie wading in a spring, talking in shorthand about the land and their family's history with it. I listened closely. Their voices sounded familiar to me, like echoes of my own family—things we said, stories we told. Freed from fact, I pursued myth. And I embraced the reality that the stories we tell about ourselves evolve as we repeat them over and over again.

> Making biscuits from scratch seemed like something I ought to know how to do—like changing the oil in a car or knotting a tie.

By the time my then-girlfriend (now wife) and I left Wyoming for jobs in another state, I no longer worried over recreating my grandfather's biscuits. I had Burge and others to encourage me when I got frustrated or felt like a fraud—in the kitchen and on the page. I accepted the notion that memory is not static. Like a good recipe or novel, it changes along with us. And so do the results.

Caleb Johnson is the author of the novel Treeborne*, now available in paperback. He grew up in Alabama and teaches at Appalachian State University.*

Summer in Montgomery

PAYTON SYKES' MAMA MADE ALL KINDS OF GOOD FOOD. SHE WAS KNOWN for her collards, mac and cheese, and black-eyed peas. His favorite dish was her fried chicken. Nobody could make it like her, and nobody ever will. She took her recipe to the grave. "My mama's fried chicken was the best fried chicken I ever ate," he told me. I met Sykes while driving through Montgomery one afternoon last summer. He was in his backyard grilling ribs that you could smell from the road. I share the faces and stories of Alabamians as part of a project celebrating the state's bicentennial. Like Sykes, most are willing and eager to share a bit of their life with a stranger. We talked about food, his family, and lessons life has taught him. After our conversation, I asked if he wanted to put his ribs down before I took a photo. "Nah, I'm country," he said.

— TAMIKA MOORE, *photographer*

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The SFA documents, studies, and explores the diverse food cultures of the changing American South. Our work sets a welcome table where all may consider our history and our future in a spirit of respect and reconciliation.

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