Gravy

SPECIAL GULF EDITION

SUMMER '10

A FOOD LETTER
FROM THE SOUTHERN FOODWAYS ALLIANCE

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Gravy

ABOUT GRAVY

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

I AM EXCITED to be *Gravy*'s new editor. (A special thanks to Tom Head for his five years of service in that role.) I'm a North Carolina native who, after two years at *The Oxford American* magazine, is now pursuing an MA in folklore at UNC-Chapel Hill. In the wake of the worst oil spill in this country's history—which has been gushing for nearly three months as of press time—the SFA felt compelled to devote this issue to the Gulf residents who make their living in the seafood industry and whose lives have been turned upside down by this disaster. I was proud to help Ashley Hall bring some of those stories into print.

—Sara Camp Arnold

MY CALL TO THE COAST

by Ashley Hall

AS THE GUT-WRENCHING NARRATIVE of the BP oil spew began to unfold, my face got redder each day—with anger, frustration, sorrow, helplessness. I am an Alabama native and a lifelong resident of the Deep South. The beaches of my childhood were being soiled. I watched every news report, hoping I could plug the spill with my vigilance.

Eventually, acceptance set in. The recovery is going to take a long time. And not a single person on the planet can tell us what the fallout will be for the coasts of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida.

Like so many of you, I felt a pull to do something. Anything. It hit me that what I could do was spend a little bit of time and discover firsthand what was happening in the Gulf Coast communities that meant the most to me.

Specifically, I decided to find out how this oil—and, in some places, the mere threat of oil—has already impacted the traditional seafood communities of eastern Mississippi, Alabama, and the western panhandle of Florida. I hit the road for two weeks in late June, drove east from Biloxi to Apalachicola, and posted dispatches on my personal travel blog (www.thirdcoastbyways.com).

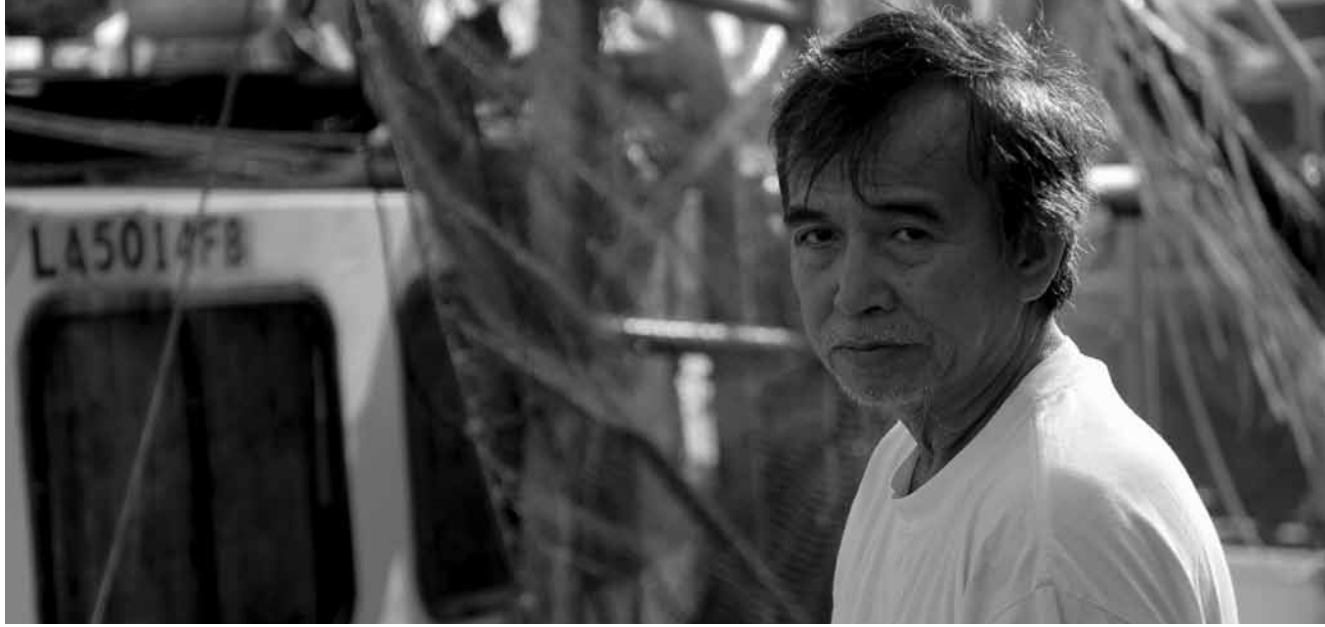
I also collected interviews and stories for the SFA's oral history project. Amy Evans Streeter was incredibly supportive of my project, and I thank her heartily. Please know that there are many, many communities in dire straits down that way. The places I visited are not necessarily worse off than anywhere else along the Gulf. But this is the Coast I knew, and the Coast that I wanted to document.

Ashley Hall is a freelance writer, wine professional, former newspaperwoman, and food enthusiast. A native of Birmingham, Alabama, she is now a loyal resident of Atlanta, Georgia.

RIGHT: *Miss Martha, a shrimp boat owned by Buddy Ward and Sons Seafood in Apalachicola, Florida. The boat is named for co-owner Tommy Ward's mother, Martha Pearl Wood.*

CLOSURES AND UNCERTAINTY ARE "WORSE THAN KATRINA"

Bayou la Batre, Alabama, and Biloxi, Mississippi



I BEGIN MY TRIP in Bayou la Batre, Alabama, and Biloxi, Mississippi. Forty-five miles apart, both communities depend on shrimp for economic survival. And both were walloped by Hurricane Katrina five years ago.

In Bayou la Batre, beached shrimp boats, boarded-up businesses, and rotting shells of houses are everywhere. In Biloxi, there are open fields where in-town neighborhoods used to be. Now, citizens of the two towns watch as the largest oil spill in American history guts their livelihoods and threatens their way of life again.

2010 should have been their comeback year. Infrastructure was adequate, the long winter had nurtured a bumper shrimp crop, and prices were up. "It was looking like it was going to be a pretty profitable year, like it was ten or twelve years ago," explains Frank Parker, thirty-seven, a sixth-generation Biloxi shrimper. Instead, almost all of the waters off of eastern Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama are closed to fishing. "It's pretty bad," says Frank. "It's a real uncertain future for the industry. It's a real uncertain future for the whole Gulf of Mexico."

IN THE WORKING-CLASS community of Bayou La Batre, nearly everyone I meet has been a fisherman or shrimper at one time, or is related to someone who was. But on the first day of my visit, I hear multiple times that it's become "impossible" to make a living harvesting seafood. High fuel prices and the easy availability of cheap imports have long meant—even before the oil spread like a pall across the water—that fewer American shrimp were gracing American dinner tables.

ABOVE: *Mai Van Nguyen, a shrimper and Southeast Asian immigrant, was one of only two selling product to Sea Pearl Seafood Company in Bayou La Batre on June 21.*

Many locals believe that the emotional and economic toll of this oil spill will exceed that of the hurricane of the century. "After Katrina, we lost everything, but we were back in business in three weeks," explains Michael Ladnier, who has been in the seafood-packaging business in Bayou La Batre for forty-one years. Michael says that since the spill, his business is off nearly eighty percent. Nobody needs seafood packaging if no seafood is being caught.

IN BILOXI, business prospects are similarly bleak. I discover as much at Gollott Seafood Company, a shrimp-processing company here. Owner Richard Gollott, sixty-six, has one of the more upbeat tones in town, even though his business has screeched to a halt. Before Hurricane Katrina, the company was buying shrimp off of more than one hundred shrimp boats. After Katrina, it took him four years to get back to about fifty boats. This June, that number is down to three.

"If you let it, it'll depress you, because you don't know what's going to happen tomorrow," Richard admits. "But I'm optimistic about them getting the well capped."

The busiest season for Richard's employees should be right

now. "This is the time of year when they would make their money," he explains. "They usually work seventy to eighty hours a week." As of early July, his fifty employees were working about twenty hours a week. According to Richard, BP has "stepped up to the plate" by paying claims to some workers and businesses hurt by the spill, including Gollott Seafood Company. Still, it is unclear how many of the hourly workers in the area have received payments.

MANY OF THE hourly workers in the shrimp plants and oyster-shucking houses around here are immigrants from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Together, they make up about a third of the population of Bayou la Batre and its surrounding areas.

They began coming to the U.S. in the mid-1970s as refugees fleeing war and political turmoil, and flocked to the Gulf fishing communities because this is the work they knew. Once here, they sought grueling jobs shucking oysters and heading shrimp. They were, according to Richard Gollott, willing to work longer hours than any of the locals at the time. "I think they saved the shrimping industry on the Mississippi Gulf Coast," Richard argues. A generation has gone by, and the Southeast Asian population is now part of the local fabric of most fishing communities between New Orleans and Mobile Bay.

Boat People SOS, a national nonprofit working in Vietnamese-American communities, operates a branch in Bayou La Batre. Earlier this spring, BPSOS was hosting financial literacy classes and English-as-a-Second-Language training. Community building, not crisis management, was their focus.

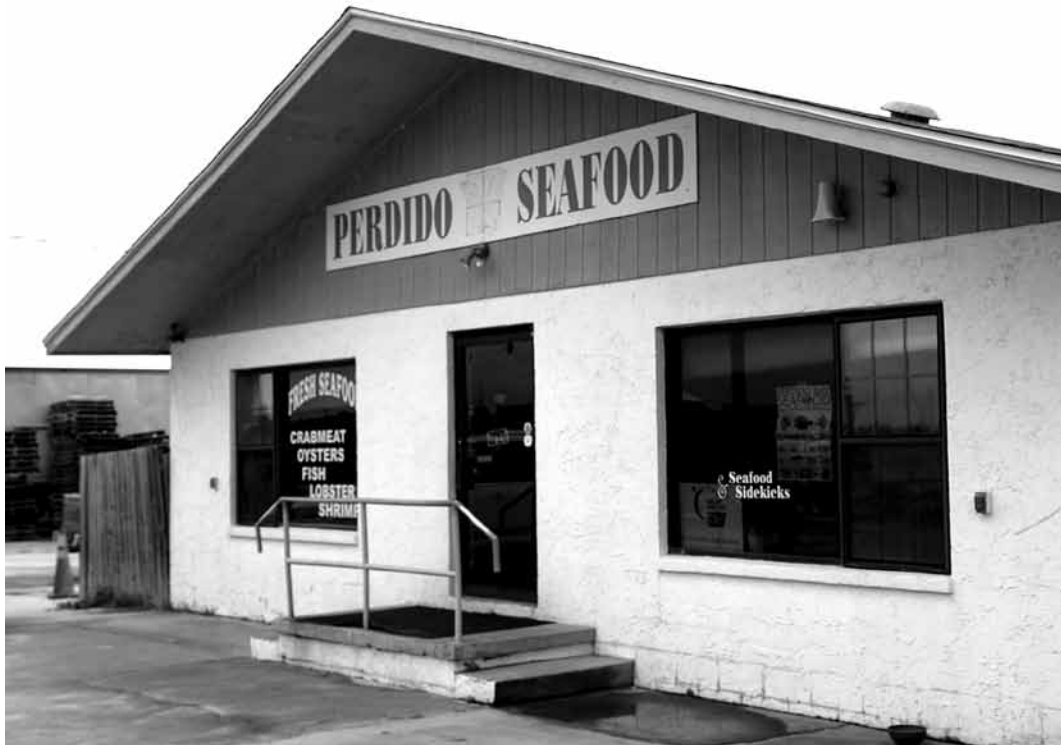
Since the spill, demand for their services has spiked. Now they help career oyster shuckers and shrimp packagers apply for food stamps, unemployment, and BP claims. They've also established a food bank, because many seafood workers are going hungry.

DREAD HANGS in the air here. Grown men and women will occasionally tear up in frustration. But mostly people just shake their heads. Speaking with Michael Ladnier, I offer condolences for his family's hardships. He cuts me off.

"We'll overcome it. Somehow we will," Michael says quickly. I swear I hear him smile as he says this last part: "We're resilient." Like many folks around here, I think he's had to say that before.

A FAMILY BUSINESS IS FORCED TO RELY ON "SOMEBODY ELSE'S SEAFOOD"

Perdido Key, Florida



THEIR LAST BOATS of fresh Gulf seafood unloaded on June 1, exactly six weeks after the Deepwater Horizon oil rig blew up. "We filmed it," says Joy Hatfield, one of the owners of Perdido Bay Seafood, on the western fringe of Pensacola.

"We took a bunch of pictures. We were all sad because we knew that was probably it for a while," explains Teresa Fagan, Joy's granddaughter. Twenty-nine-year-old Teresa says she's been working in the family business "since I was in the womb, practically."

ABOVE: *Teresa Fagan and her grandmother Joy Hatfield are accustomed to selling fish from their own boats.*

PREVIOUS PAGE: *Perdido Bay Seafood's storefront is located about a mile east of the Alabama state line.*

Joy opened Perdido Bay Seafood with her husband and their son in November of 1988. Since then, it's been a thriving wholesale and retail operation. Until this spring, eight deep-sea boats, two of which the Hatfield family owns, have fished exclusively for them. Teresa believes that her family's sea-to-storefront ethic is what sets them apart. Their customers can see the fresh fish coming right off the water and into the back door of the shop.

"We're not like other places," Teresa says. Then she corrects herself. "Well, now we're like other places. Now we get our fish from somebody else." She shakes her head. "It's ridiculous. It's embarrassing."

The deep-sea area they've always fished—the region that provided them with bountiful harvests of grouper, cobia, snapper, and triggerfish—is about ninety miles off the coast of Alabama and Mississippi, according to Teresa.

The federal government closed it to all fishing in the last days of May. In theory, the company's boats could navigate around the closed areas to the open ones east and southwest of here. But that detour would add two days to each end of the trip, making it financially untenable.

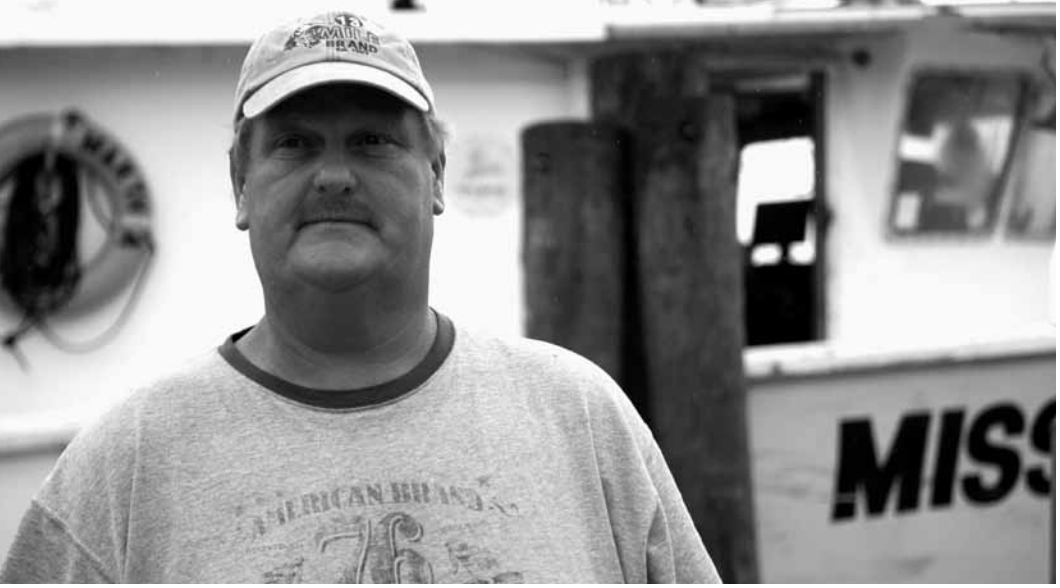
The retail store has product for sale—fish bought from suppliers farther east of here in Florida, and oysters shipped from Galveston Bay, Texas, four hundred fifty miles away. But the selection is skimpy. Sales have skidded from $8,000 to $2,000 a week. On a normal summer afternoon, five employees would be working feverishly behind the counter. But on June 28, two of the four workers present were changing light bulbs.

IN ADDITION to the storefront, Perdido Bay Seafood was also a thriving wholesale operation, selling frozen whole fish to brokers in Atlanta, New York, and elsewhere. But because they can no longer fish, that side of the business is closed indefinitely.

While sales are failing, speculation is thriving. There is no official word on when the any of the waters will reopen, but Teresa and Joy hear rumors constantly. Some say a portion of the waters could be fished as early as this fall. Others guess it could take ten or more years before the federal government permits fishing here. As it is for so many who make their living in the Gulf seafood industry, the future is a depressing mystery.

In the weeks between the oil rig explosion on April 20 and the water closure on June 1, business at Perdido Bay was tremendous. "It was like the Fourth of July"—one of their busiest times of the year—Joy says. The regular customers were stockpiling. People were buying shrimp to freeze for weddings in the fall. "They thought it was going to be the last they were going to get," Teresa says.

When I ask Joy if the family has its own seafood stash hidden in a freezer somewhere, she looks at me mildly and says no, as if she hadn't thought of it. "I don't know," she says. "Your heart just isn't in it, I guess."



Why Healthy Oysters
GO UNHARVESTED

Apalachicola Bay, Florida

AS OF EARLY JULY, oysters, shrimp, and fish from Florida's Apalachicola Bay are healthy and fresh. There's no oil here, and fishing is wide open. Still, Tommy Ward, owner of 13 Mile oyster company, says that his production is down eighty percent.

"Everybody's gone BP-ing," he says. During a normal summer, Tommy, a third-generation oysterman and winner of the SFA's 2006 Ruth Fertel Keeper of the Flame Award, would be buying oysters from thirty to forty boats, each bringing in twelve to fifteen bags of oysters per day. This summer, he's working with six boats. "You don't have the workforce to harvest the product," he explains.

Shortly after the spill, BP set up a program called Vessels of Opportunity, which hires area fishermen to maintain booms, scout for contaminated wildlife, and skim surface oil where possible. The program is controversial in Apalachicola because, unlike in Alabama and Mississippi, fishing is open here.

Many ask, *Who can blame the fishermen for taking work that pays essentially ten times what they would make in a day oystering?* Through the BP program, the owner of each participating boat gets paid at least $1,200 per day (depending on the size of the boat) and $200 per hand on deck, plus expenses. They work eight hours a day, are not permitted to fish, and have to wear life vests. That last requirement gets a big laugh around here.

"It's human nature to go to bigger money, you know, to supply the needs of the family," says Johnny Richards, a professional shrimper, fisherman, and oyster harvester. Johnny, sixty-eight, has been in the seafood business since before his eighth birthday. That's when he started helping his dad out on the family boat here.

Johnny tells me that a harvester can make about $20 per sixty-pound bag of oysters. In a good day, a boat will bring in twelve to fifteen bags, which on the high end is about $300 a day. As for shrimping, Johnny explains, if you bust it, you can bring in $500 a week. "That's an excellent, really good week. But there, too, a lot of them work day and night. It makes an old man out of you in a hurry." Now these same men are being paid $1,200 not to fish for a mere eight hours a day. It seems like a pretty easy decision.

LEFT TOP: *Tommy Ward of 13 Mile oyster company.*
LEFT BOTTOM: *Johnny Richards has worked the waters of Apalachicola since he was eight years old.*

OVER THE LAST FEW WEEKS, Tommy Ward has been losing the battle to maintain production levels and keep his business chugging along. His son decided to take two of the five family boats out to work for BP. The money helps, but Tommy doesn't like it. He just wants to do what he loves and keep the oystering way of life alive.

"What do you do? You've got customers what you've had for thirty years. You struggle and ease along with the little product that you're getting in to save some of your major accounts, you know, that have been with you for years."

Tommy realizes there are other places in the world to buy oysters. If his customers are forced to go elsewhere, he knows it could be an uphill battle to get the business back later, even if the oyster bars stay perfectly clean.

But what if they don't stay clean? As of early July, Apalachicola Bay is pristine, but oil lurks only twenty miles west of here.

I ask Johnny if he has thought about what he will do if he can't fish anymore. He pauses. "Not really. I'm just about the age now that no one would want to hire me." He pauses again. "I hadn't thought about what I'd do if I wasn't fishing."

In the last five years, the people on the Gulf have lived through so much. Hurricanes Katrina, Dennis, and Ivan. Drought and recession. Insurance companies that were slow or reluctant to settle claims. Competition from cheap seafood imports. High gas prices that made fishing runs cost-prohibitive. And now, the biggest oil spill in American history.

As of this printing, that damn well is still gushing oil. With no end in sight. These people are tired.

"It's their way of life. You're taking away a way of life from a bunch of people," Tommy says tearfully. He takes a few deep breaths and utters simply, "Families."

I ask Tommy if he has anything to say about what the future holds. He manages a smile and shakes his head. "We've never faced anything like this before. I don't have a clue what to do. I don't think anybody else does, either."

A CREATIVE MIND

Full of Ideas for the Future

New Orleans, Louisiana

RICHARD MCCARTHY is the executive director of Market Umbrella, a New Orleans–based, not-for-profit champion of ecologically friendly and economically sustainable public markets. In 2003, Market Umbrella founded the White Boot Brigade—named in honor of the ubiquitous white rubber boots worn by fishermen—to promote a new model of seafood sales. The Brigade helps independent fishermen follow the farmers market, sea-to-consumer business model.

Despite the fact that Richard's home state is the hardest hit by the oil spill, in a recent interview, I found him to be remarkably buoyant about the future. In a region where so many are understandably paralyzed by uncertainty, Richard churns out ideas with inspiring confidence.

"We're in perilous waters—economically, ecologically, you name it," Richard says. "But as depressed and worried as I am, I'm also hopeful. There will be food again coming out of the Gulf."

According to Richard, there still *is* food coming out of the Gulf. But, due to water closures, the torrent of shrimp, oysters, and fish that usually flows from Louisiana's waters has slowed to a trickle. "Our situation right now is that we have many, many more fishermen harvesting a much, much smaller area," Richard explains.

"New Orleans is a city that loves its seafood—that is obsessed with its seafood," he says. "If you have product right now, it sells."

"New Orleans is a city that loves its seafood—that is obsessed with its seafood," he says. "If you have product right now, it sells." In fact, he sees locals hoarding the dwindling catches, buying in abundance and freezing it. "The fact that we may not have ample supply is creating a great sense of anxiety."

"New Orleans restaurant chefs have said that weeknights, they're selling lots of seafood off their menus, and weekends, seafood sales are way down." The accepted wisdom is that more of their seats on the weekends are filled with tourists, who are afraid of Gulf seafood. But during the week, the locals eat it up.

"The brand of Gulf Coast seafood is so badly tarnished by the oil. It's going to be very difficult to make the case that it's okay," he concedes. "There's going to need to be a great deal of work to convince consumers to come back to the coast."

The first step could be what Richard calls a "Shuck and Awe" public relations campaign, fixed on convincing chefs and consumers nationwide to trust the quality of Gulf seafood. But in Richard's mind, that would be just the beginning.

"This is a teachable moment," Richard says. "We use disaster as opportunity."

"Whether it's three months or three years or thirty years, once the oil has been stopped, and the beaches have been cleaned, and we know what we're dealing with, we can use creativity and ingenuity and build on the lines of solidarity between folks who like to harvest the food and those like to eat the food."

"Move the fishermen from the industrial to the boutique," he suggests. If you empower fishermen to fish naturally and sustainably, they can then turn around and sell their catch direct to quality-conscious consumers, capitalizing on scarcity, niche, and seasonality—as farmers, cheesemakers, and vignerons do.

"I think it's an unbelievable opportunity to look into AOC certification," he says, referring to the European practice of honoring the terroir of a foodstuff by legally codifying its provenance and production methods.

If this comes to pass, American consumers might one day honor Lake Pontchartrain shrimp and Apalachicola oysters as the French now honor Cavaillon melons or Châteauneuf-du-Pape wines. "We can really reinforce the taste of place more than just 'Gulf Coast.' I can get excited about eating a place," Richard says.

"I don't think this is going to be the end," Richard asserts. "In this slowing down, there's going to be great opportunity. "

PAGE 13: *Richard McCarthy is the executive director of Market Umbrella.* BELOW: *The White Boot Brigade, a project founded by Market Umbrella, aims to link small fishermen directly to consumers, farmers market-style.*

marketumbrella.org

WHITE BOOT BRIGADE

A GULF COAST INSTITUTION

Struggles with Low Supply

Theodore, Alabama

BAYLEY'S, the restaurant that gave the world West Indies salad and fried crab claws, is sputtering along without regular access to oysters or crab. They still have access to fish and shrimp, and they are still serving their mullet and grits on Wednesday nights. But without crab, Bayley's signature dishes have been removed from the menu. The business is holding on by a thread. Katie Smith, a granddaughter of the owners, says the restaurant won't last long like this. Meager catches and fewer tourists are the reasons. "My grandfather is having a hard time letting go," she says. Bill Bayley has vowed to close rather than serve imported seafood. As of *Gravy* press time, the doors are still open.

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

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Thank you

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