



GRAVY

FALL 2021
NO. 81



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GRAVY

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KNOT TODAY

A turn toward the light

BY SARA CAMP MILAM

THERE WAS A TIME IN MY LIFE, namely college and the first couple of years thereafter, when I could read a heavy novel or listen to sad-sack indie rock music for the better part of a day, often capped off by an hours-long nap. One term for this is depression. Another is having too much time on your hands. I've experienced both of these conditions, individually and in tandem. They are emotional quicksand.

Some fifteen years later, my idle time is much more limited. So is my emotional bandwidth, a fact I discovered in the months after giving birth to my first child. (I could handle *The West Wing* and little else during my maternity leave with Sally.) In the last five years, I've constantly negotiated that emotional budget, spending and saving as the demands of my family and my work—and the fluctuations of my mental health—allow. Maybe you're the

Julia M. Watercolor/Creative Market

same way. Maybe most of us are.

The length of my morning commute is no more than three songs, one of my favorite luxuries of living in a relatively small town. Lately, Sally and I sing along to the Trolls theme song, Justin Timberlake's "Can't Stop the Feeling." By the time we pull into the circle drive at her preschool on the University of Mississippi campus, we're halfway through the next track in our family playlist, the Proclaimers' "I'm Gonna Be (500 Miles)," which Sally calls "Da-da-lun-da." As I double back through campus to my parking spot near SFA World Headquarters, I'll switch to a few minutes' worth of my latest audiobook mystery or a feel-good Lizzo anthem, depending on whether I'm feeling cozy, or in need of a boost.

After the children go to bed at night, Kirk and I choose a show calibrated to our dwindling reserves of emotional and intellectual engagement. Lately, that means an episode of *The Great British Baking Show*. If I'm lucky, I'll cap it off with a few pages of a novel—I'm a long-time sucker for mysteries, especially if they're set in some windswept corner of the British Isles.

Despite these attempts at balancing my emotional budget, I've also managed to consume a staggering volume of doom-and-gloom news in this era of COVID, climate change, and contentious politics. *The Great British Baking Show* can only help so much if you're doomscrolling virus statistics on your phone at the same time.

I'm not advocating for heads in the sand, and I don't wish to downplay or dismiss any number of very real, very tragic global phenomena. But I had to change my habits. Enter knitting.

Late this summer, as a new school year began against a backdrop of maxed-out hospitals, vaccine holdouts, and mask resistance, I asked SFA oral historian Annemarie Anderson to teach me how

to knit. Soon, instead of estimating Sally's chance of COVID exposure at school based on county- and state-level data, I was two feet into a scarf of my own making—a soft, thick merino wool in a soothing shade of deep teal.

In these pages, there is both tragedy and hope. Small-business owners and community fixtures succumb to COVID-19. Herbicides drift over farms, wreaking havoc with crops. People face food insecurity and hunger. But children step up to fill their fathers' shoes; the judicial process does its job; and neighbors feed neighbors. Darkness and light. The way of the world.

It has always been my goal for *Gravy*, both print and podcast, to make you think. And sometimes that means that our stories challenge. They confront uncomfortable truths, or they unearth painful history with present-day resonance. But as we look ahead to 2022, my colleagues and I are recommitting ourselves to tell stories that delight and entertain you, too.

Not long ago, *The New York Times* published a list of the best television comedies of the 2000s. In writing about *Parks and Recreation*, a favorite show of mine, critic Margaret Lyons made an observation that has stuck with me: "...there's artistry in pleasure, too, and...companionship and joy are not vices." She's right, I believe. Joy matters. So does wonder, and yes, humor, too. I need it right now. Maybe you do as well.

Last weekend, I finished my first scarf. As soon as I bound off the last row, my fingers began to itch for the next project. Any day now, a new set of needles and a skein of dove-gray yarn should arrive in the mail, and I'll begin making a winter hat for my son. It feels good to create something that I hope will be beautiful, something that has meaning, something that someone can use. 🐣

FEATURED CONTRIBUTORS

Gustavo Arellano is a columnist with the *Los Angeles Times*, host of its daily news podcast *The Times*, and author of *Taco USA: How Mexican Food Conquered America*. He has been a *Gravy* columnist for five years and still marvels that a Mexican kid from southern California has accomplished this. He aims to cover a South that's yet to make it into American depictions of the region, to tell Southerners about their newest neighbors, and to elevate a people who are changing the South as much as the South is changing them. He loves that despite all of his years of journalism, there are still so many stories to tell.



Chris Jay is a native of Sarepta, Louisiana, who has spent the last twenty-some-odd years living in and writing about his adopted hometown of Shreveport. He is currently pursuing an MA in Louisiana Folklife and Southern Studies at Northwestern State University in Natchitoches (of meat pie fame). He publishes the newsletter and website *Stuffed & Busted* and produces the podcasts *All Y'all* and *Once Upon a Time in Shreveport*. As a writer, he takes the same strategy that he did when arrowhead-hunting as a kid: commit to one place, even if it can be an awful place, with his entire heart.



Bartow J. Elmore studies the past to understand how we can live more sustainably on this planet. His work looks outward from the South to consider how homegrown businesses have reshaped economies and ecosystems around the region and beyond. A native of Atlanta, he teaches environmental history and is a core member of the Sustainability Institute at The Ohio State University. He is the author of *Citizen Coke: The Making of Coca-Cola Capitalism* and *Seed Money: Monsanto's Past and the Future of Food*. His next book is tentatively titled *Country Capitalism: The American South and Global Ecological Change*.

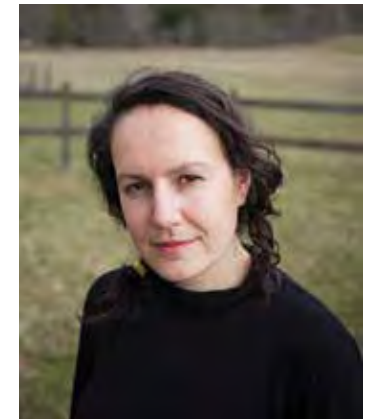


María Loor is a designer and illustrator who lives in Los Angeles with her partner, two crazy aussies, and two serious cats. She was born and grew up in Ecuador, raised with Colombian traditions and delicious food. She graduated from RISD with honors and worked in New York before returning to Ecuador, where she started her design studio and led the graphic design department at Universidad Casa Grande. She later lived in Quito, Buenos Aires, London, and Miami, where she designed, illustrated, and exhibited her paintings while raising her two boys. Her artistic style is naive and figurative, with a strong Latina flavor.

Katina Parker is a Black, Indigenous, Two-spirit filmmaker, photographer, and writer in Durham, NC. She received her MFA in film production from the University of Southern California and her BA in speech communications from Wake Forest University, where she was mentored by Dr. Maya Angelou and Black Arts Movement poet Sonia Sanchez. She is the founder of Feed Durham NC, a mutual aid collective that began in response to mounting hunger in the Durham area during COVID. She believes that feeding one another is the most humane and sustainable way to keep ourselves safe.



Irina Zhorov is a writer, audio producer, and photographer in Boone, NC. She is a frequent contributor to *Gravy* podcast. She's reported on Russian rodeos; has documented coal, silver, and uranium mines; and is now happily exploring the South with microphone in hand. She's also working on a novel based in Soviet Siberia. Her first and enduring love was photography, and she's always thinking in images. She loves stepping into other people's lives and hearing their stories, and if she can make someone in power uncomfortable, or help a listener reconsider how they see the world—that's always a nice feeling.



TOP TO BOTTOM: Courtesy of Gustavo Arellano; Jonathan Zadra; Rachael Derello

TOP TO BOTTOM: Jim Noettzel; Gilda Zevallos; Courtesy of Irina Zhorov

Southern Foodways Alliance
Most Visited Places

S F A M V P

REYNA
DUONG'S

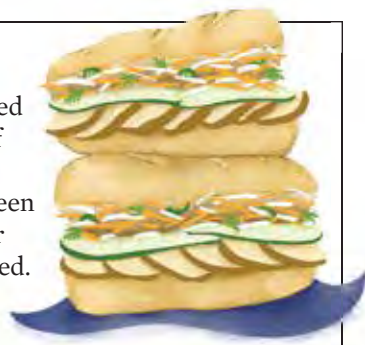
Dallas



REYNA DUONG IS THE AWARD-WINNING CHEF-OWNER OF SANDWICH HAG in Dallas, Texas. When she moved to Dallas from southern California more than two decades ago, she was shocked by how nice everyone was. She came to realize that just as people in Texas held stereotypes about SoCal, the rest of the country stereotyped Texas. “It’s not just people in cowboy hats!” National media coverage especially overlooks the considerable diversity of Dallas and its surrounding metro area, Duong says. Her family fled Vietnam when she was one, and though she’s never been back, she feels at home when she visits her favorite Vietnamese-owned spots in the Dallas metro area.

Sandwich Hag, Dallas

Our regular customer base is very diverse. I’ve tried to cultivate that diversity as part of our mission of inclusion, to be a safe space. My brother Sang has Down Syndrome. He was my first employee. It’s been really great to build a platform to hire and partner with folks with disabilities who are differently abled. I love to see the extended age groups of our customers, and to see picky children chowing down on bánh mì and cà ri. It was important to me not to have a huge menu so that I could have fun sharing my chef’s specials—the very time-consuming dishes that you’ll only find in a Vietnamese home.



Vietnamese Food Trucks, Garland

There are two groupings: one in the parking lot of a Vietnamese strip mall called Saigon Cali, and another at a former car wash. You look up, and it’s your people. Most of the trucks are open Thursday through Sunday nights, from about 6 P.M. until 11 or 11:30. All are small and family-owned. I go to each truck for a specific item. Mooshie has bánh khọt, little savory pancakes that are nice and crispy, with shrimp, chives, and mung beans, and you dip them in nước chấm.



Saigon Block, Richardson

I go for the whole baked catfish, cá nướng. You get a huge plate of lettuce, herbs, pickles, cucumbers, sprouts, rice paper, a little bowl of hot water to soften the rice paper, and vermicelli noodles. You basically roll your own fish spring rolls and enjoy it family-style. We don’t talk about the talent in Vietnamese cuisine enough. To bake a fish hundreds of times a day, for years, and have it be consistent every single time, and the skin be so crisp, and the fish flaky and meaty—that’s not luck. That’s honed talent and skills.



Pho Tay Do, Richardson

They’re known for their bún bò Huế, a spicy beef noodle soup. It’s a clear broth, but the chilies give it a reddish hue. It’s got tender beef and round, slightly chewy noodles, which I love, and is served with pork blood pudding and ham hock. It comes with a plate of fresh herbs and veggies, like bean sprouts and shaved purple cabbage. I always add limes and ask for a side of mắm ruốc, which is shrimp paste, and extra sa tế, or chile. The funkier, the better.



Illustrations by Bridgette Blanton / Tiny Pencil Studio

“Most Visited Places” is an ongoing digital and print series, underwritten by The Mountain Valley Spring Water.



PULL UP A STOOL

In memory of Clark Shaw

BY JOHN T. EDGE

Illustration by Disha Sharma

CLARK AND JUANITA SHAW, PROPRIETORS OF THE OLD COUNTRY STORE in Jackson, Tennessee, stood at the top of the stairs here in Barnard Observatory in March of 2019. Many visitors who climb the steep flight arrive out of breath. Clark and Juanita arrived smiling, lugging a chrome-backed stool with a black vinyl seat, mounted on a short white pedestal. Clark had acquired it from a Jackson friend who specialized in demolitions, and who, knowing his interest in restaurant history, sold Clark a few stools.

It was a gift for the Southern Foodways Alliance, in honor of our work and the long friendship that connects their family and our staff. And it was an artifact, worthy of a museum. The presence of that stool in our office made clear that, when SFA talks about restaurants as public spaces, we consider matters of deep importance that resonate across space and time. After Clark and Juanita left, we installed their gift to the right of the main door and mounted a framed panel of text above:

This stool was salvaged from the Woolworth store in Jackson, Tennessee. In October of 1960, inspired by a sit-in movement that began that February in Greensboro, North Carolina, students from Lane College in Jackson staged peaceful protests that demanded integration of the city's restaurants.

On October 27, the students took seats on stools like this one, in the whites only section of the Woolworth lunch counter. They requested service. In response, the white operators closed the counter. And white counter-protesters dragged the young men and women from the counter, sprayed them with insect repellent, and pelted them with rotten eggs.

Efforts made by the Lane College students, coupled with the courage of other Black youth in cities across the South, made clear the burdens and horrors of Jim Crow and the promise of Black activism. That courage drove the passage of the Civil Rights Act of

1964, which outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, or national origin in restaurants and other places of public accommodation engaged in interstate commerce.

CLARK CAME INTO OUR LIVES IN 2012. Sam's Bar-B-Q, down the road from his restaurant in the little town of Humboldt, had burned. Clark had kept up with our post-Katrina rebuild of Willie Mae's Scotch House in New Orleans. He asked SFA to help this family business rebuild. In the end, Nick Pihakis led the effort, with SFA volunteers serving as labor. Four months later, Sam's reopened. Our friendship with the Shaw family grew.

Under Clark's leadership, the Old Country Store proved a remarkable place. I remember stopping there with SFA colleagues on the way to Nashville. As we walked from the hoecake station to the hot bar stocked with collards, Mary Beth and I marveled at how this buffet restaurant just off I-40 was the most integrated space we'd seen in years. That space also reflected contemporary tensions. I looked up in the rafters to see a piece of Old South memorabilia mounted in the eaves. On the way to the car, I walked across the parking lot to stare at the Tesla Superchargers.

IN AUGUST OF 2020, CLARK WROTE to me, "It's survival mode here but we are praying for God's great favor, another round of PPP and a vaccine sooner than



Clark and Juanita Shaw at SFA World Headquarters, March 2019

with his family. Months passed.

In June of this year, SFA hosted a potential donor in Oxford. After lunch on the Square, they wanted to see where we worked. So we climbed those same stairs that Clark and Juanita climbed. When our new friends got to the top they did what most people now do when they walk in our offices. After taking in the soaring ceiling (constructed to house a rotating telescope), after staring at the oversized barbecue photographs mounted on the far wall, they turned to take in the stool and read the script. And then, noting the tribute to him on the framed panel, they told us that Clark Shaw had died. Back in November 2020, when COVID-19 ravaged Tennessee.

All this year, I've written about built environments for *Gravy*. About how the spaces we make with brick and mortar and board and paint reflect who we are

later." His people were vulnerable, he said. He was worried about them: "Fully 25% of our staff here at the Old Country Store came out of drug and alcohol recovery programs, usually faith based. Three of them were sex trafficked."

Clark praised the work of his son,

As we walked from the hoecake station to the hot bar stocked with collards, Mary Beth and I marveled at how this buffet restaurant just off I-40 was the most integrated space we'd seen in years.

Brooks, who had begun to lead the business: "After 53 years Covid took the Buffet and Salad Bar. We are now serving our same Southern Food FAMILY STYLE. You and your amazing team will have to come try it again soon." I told him that we wanted eat with them soon, and that we looked forward to visiting

and who we want to be. I hope when you visit SFA offices here in Barnard, you, too, will climb those creaky wooden stairs to see the stool that the Shaws hauled up those steps. And I hope you will take the time to think about people like Clark, who through their stewardship make our built spaces better. 🐦

John T. Edge is the founding director of the Southern Foodways Alliance and the host of TrueSouth on the SEC Network/ESPN. This is his last column for Gravy.



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IT'S NOT EASY BEING GREEN

Okra and nopales are cross-cultural kin.
Let me explain.

BY GUSTAVO ARELLANO

THREE SUMMERS AGO, MY WIFE and I stopped in a sweltering valley just outside Pikeville, Tennessee, on our annual Southern vacation. A group of middle-aged white women had set up shop in a log cabin as part of the World's Longest Yard Sale, the summer antiques road show that stretches from Alabama to Michigan. On counters, window ledges, and tables, the ladies displayed the harvest from their personal gardens: vegetables and fruits and preserves.

Delilah bought peaches, while I loaded up on scuppernong jelly, blackberry jam, and pickled cayenne peppers. We both filled bags with tomatoes to freshen up the sandwiches and salads that would fuel our long drive back home.

It was a welcome respite after four days of nonstop eating from Frankfort, Kentucky, to Chattanooga, Tennessee. We do love the fried bologna and smoked ham sandwiches of central Kentucky, the Mennonite

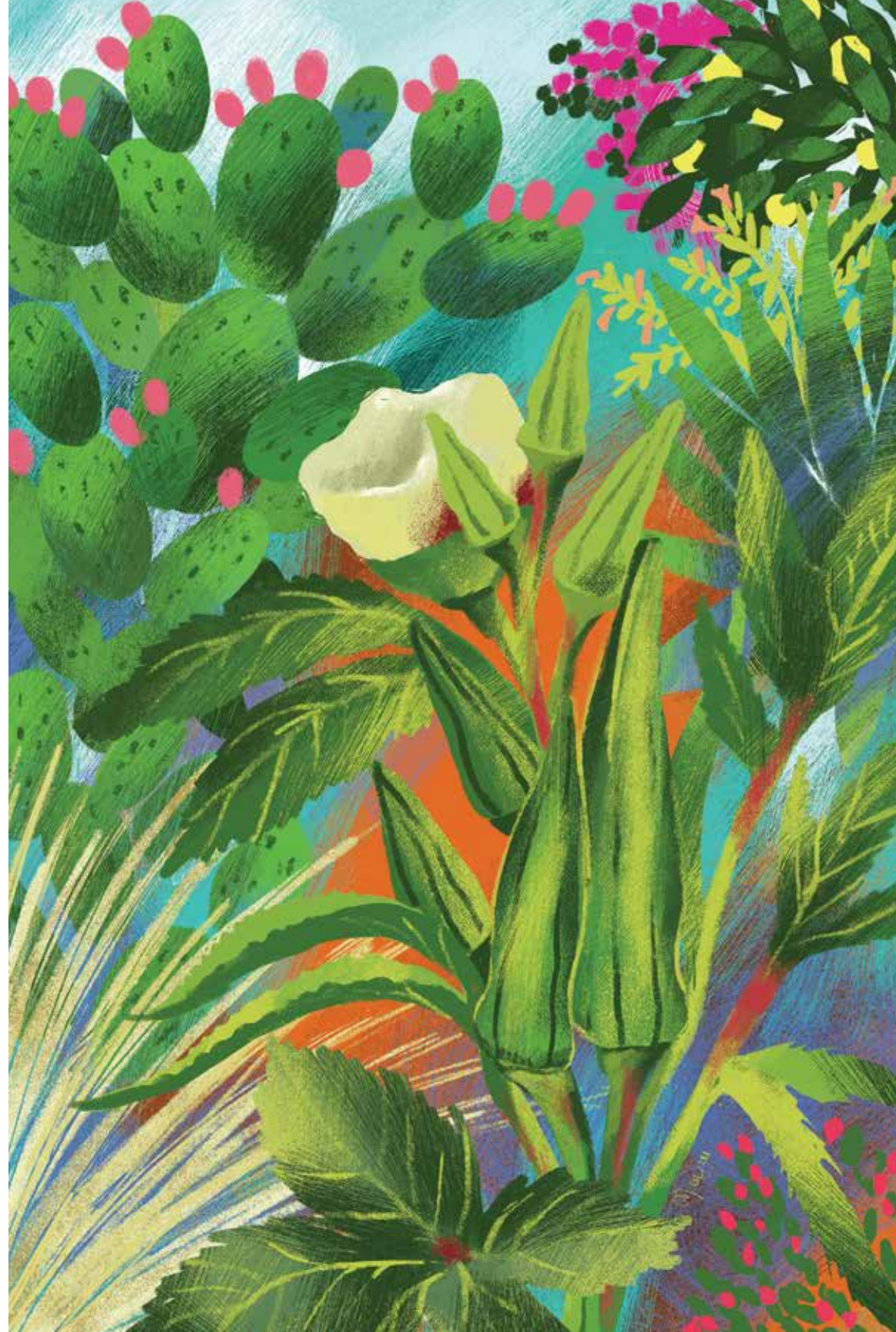
hand pies of northern Tennessee, fried-chicken breakfasts at Cracker Barrels, and arroz con pollo (ACP) dinners at Tex-Mex style restaurants. What we don't see enough of along Highway 127 are the multicultural, lighter meals we favor back home—Southern California staples like tomato salads and rice bowls.

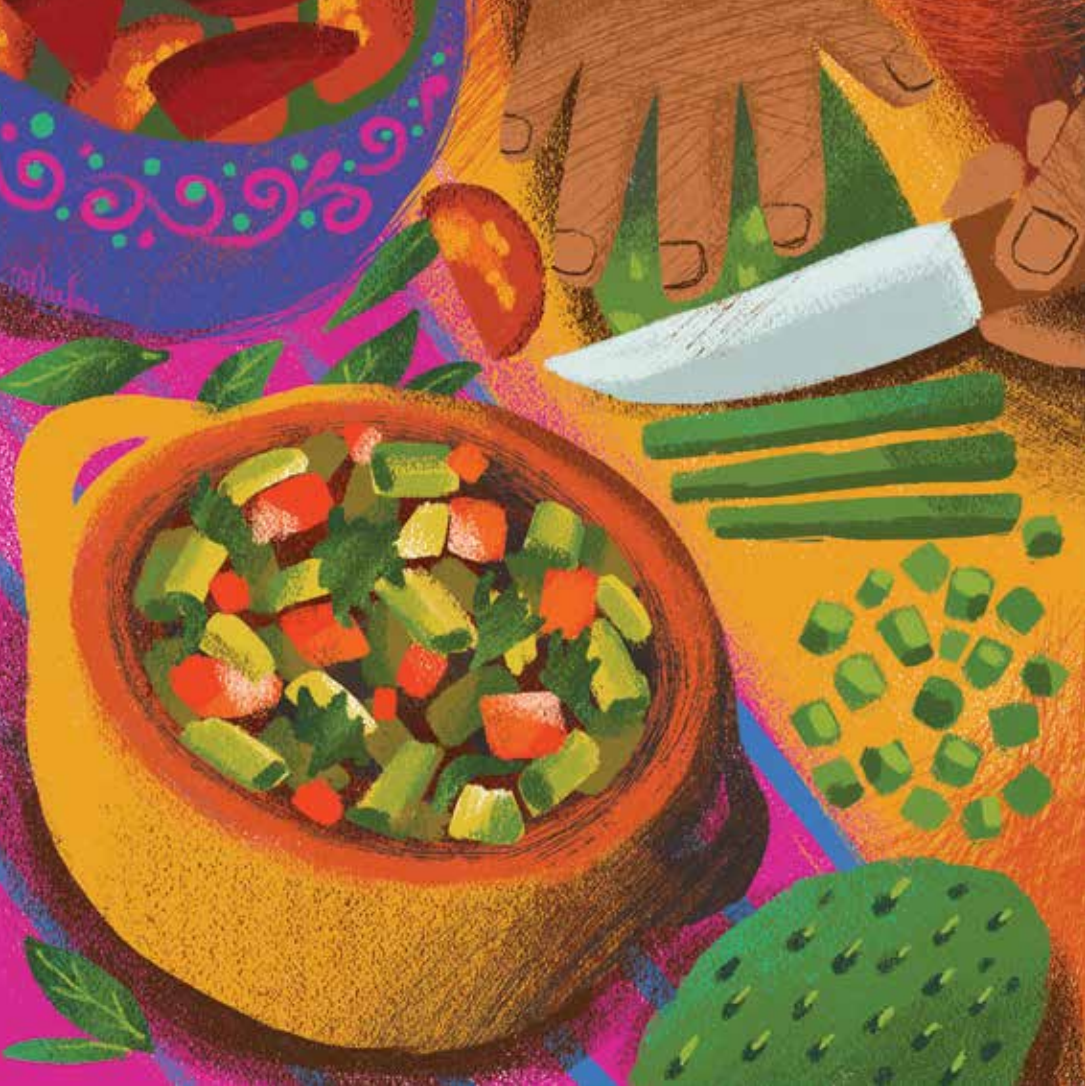
I also got a cardboard pint of something I had never bought before: okra. I didn't plan to eat it, though. No way would the pods keep on the drive back home. Instead, I wanted to save the seeds and plant them in our garden, a souvenir of our trip and a reminder to return to the South the following year.

I would've bought more okra if I had known we'd be away for so long.

For the past fourteen years, my regular trips to the South have fueled my writing for *Gravy* and other outlets. They've helped me make sense of this region and what it reveals about our changing

Illustrations by Maria Loo





nation. Now, my bourbon collection is depleted; my sorghum syrup long gone.

But I have the okra.

In the chaos of 2020, those okra seeds went unplanted. I forgot about them altogether until this past summer, when I went through the shoebox where we keep our seeds and found them in an unlabeled Ziploc bag.

I set out to grow a piece of the South for myself.

The small, wrinkled seeds grew quickly in Southern California's wetter-than-usual summer. I sprouted them in starter trays, then transplanted them

into individual containers before setting about a dozen plants in our raised beds alongside cucumbers and peppers. I had never seen an okra plant before, so I marveled at every step of the process. Its tubular pale-yellow flower. Leaves that looked like those of a maple tree. How the okra started off small and furry then smoothed out to grow until each pod was nearly a foot long.

I excitedly texted photos to my Southern friends, all of whom kindly asked why on Earth was I letting them grow so big. You're supposed to pick okra when the pod is about four inches long, they

told me. Let them grow longer, and okra get tough, woody, and inedible.

Oops.

My entire crop was useless save for the seeds. I'd have to wait until next summer for this taste of the South.

I looked across the yard to my nopales: towering prickly pear cacti. Its purple flowers were turning into fruit (called "tunas" in Mexico) that Delilah would cook down into jam and syrup. New paddles grew. Soon they would reach six inches in length, the perfect size for cooking and eating. I reminded myself to call my father to come harvest them.

For more than a decade I've been exploring connections between Mexico and the American South, and in that moment a new point of kinship struck me. Cactus is to Mexicans what okra is to Southerners: home and culture in a plant loved by us and looked down upon by most other Americans.

I'VE EATEN NOPALES MY ENTIRE life. The prickly pear cactus grows all over the world, but it's native to Mexico. It's so elemental to our diet and character that a big nopal, complete with tunas, is on Mexico's flag and coat of arms. We eat it mostly as a side, sautéed or grilled. My late mother used to cut nopales into strips, then jar them to ensure we could eat them year-round.

I first ate okra in college, at a multicultural festival. The Black students who presented it in a gumbo warned me I wouldn't like it. That I'd think the vegetable was "weird." I took a bite and told them it tasted just like nopales.

The two vegetables are far apart botanically, yet they share many similarities. Both are nutrient-dense; high in

fiber and antioxidants. Both can be mucilaginous—the fancy way of saying "slimy." Both grow abundantly and feature a bright green color that exemplifies nature at its most healing.

American society has largely left okra and cactus to Southerners and Mexicans, respectively. Some folks ridicule us for eating what they feel is poor people food.

When I try to get my Latino friends to try okra, their mouths curl up in disgust as they proclaim it slimy; never mind that cactus is even slimier. Similarly, I can't get my non-Mexican friends interested in cactus—they find the flavor "odd," despite the fact that the earthy notes of nopales are similar to those of okra.

We lovers of nopales and okra need to foster a culinary interchange. Each of those vegetables carry unique stories of resistance that outsiders should learn. I tell my Latino friends that okra may have come to the United States with enslaved Africans who carried those seeds to bring a piece of their native lands to their new home with them. And I tell my Black friends that Mexican immigrants propagated cactus as a free, reliable source of food. Hills across southern California are evidence of this ingenuity.

As much as I think everyone should eat okra and cactus, part of me doesn't want them to go mainstream. Let those who eat okra and cactus appreciate their full stories, not just their edible parts.

Toward the end of summer, I noticed some unfamiliar sprouts in my garden and decided to let the volunteers grow. They turned out to be okra. This time, I made sure to pick the plant when the pods were small and tender, then sautéed them in a pan and made okra tacos with rice and beans.

My South was back, if just for lunch. 🍴

Gustavo Arellano is Gravy's columnist and host of the The Times, the daily news podcast from the Los Angeles Times.

IT TAKES GUTS

For Shauna Anderson, chitlins are a calling.

BY DEBRA FREEMAN

SHAUNA ANDERSON IS THE QUEEN of chitlins. And she wants you to eat more of them. She adamantly believes that chitlins can bring people together. She is on a quest to bring back The Chitlin Market, her former Maryland carryout market and restaurant.

Chitlins are pig intestines, typically cooked with vinegar, celery, and onion. Although the dish is a bit more difficult to find these days, it was often served in African American restaurants and homes and dates back to the era of enslavement in the United States. Preparing the dish is labor intensive. Most uncooked chitlins are sold only partially cleaned. The intestines need to be boiled to kill harmful bacteria, followed by rinsing several times to remove hair, straw, and other stray digestive matter.

After cleaning, they are boiled for at least two hours. Some cooks batter and fry them as a last step. Chitlins are

commonly topped with vinegar and hot sauce. Their texture is similar to calamari. They take on the flavor of their seasonings—typically garlic, onion, cider vinegar, and salt.

Chitlins became so synonymous with the African-American community that the term “Chitlin Circuit” described locations where Black artists performed from the 1930s to the 1960s. The Attucks Theatre in Norfolk, Virginia; the Royal Peacock in Atlanta, Georgia; and the Apollo Theater in New York City were some of the more famous stops on the Chitlin Circuit. Many blues and rhythm and blues musicians got their big breaks in these nightclubs and bars, including legends like Sam Cooke, Ike and Tina Turner, Gladys Knight and the Pips, James Brown, and Ray Charles. And yes, many clubs served chitlins.

Anderson knows the Chitlin Circuit well. As a child in Washington, DC, she

Delphine Lee





lived a piece of that history. Her mother was a singer and her father was a saxophone player. They were surrounded by musicians like Otis Redding, Little Richard, and BB King. Her godfather, Clarence Evans, owned Evans Grill in Forestville, Maryland, a stop on the Chitlin Circuit. She remembers watching through a crib backstage as her mother sang.

After working for the IRS as a statistician, Anderson used her savings to open the Chitlin Market in Hyattsville, Maryland, in 1995. The following year, a website and shipping department followed. She cooked chitlins for her neighbors, who loved them, and it occurred to her that opening a chitlin business would be a good idea because it was difficult to find cleaned chitlins for purchase. First she needed to see if her instincts were right, so she asked a childhood friend to help do some research. They'd open the phone book and, one by one, cold-call folks. If the person on the other end picked up, Anderson or her friend asked

if they would be interested in a source for cleaned chitlins. Most said yes.

After the Chitlin Market opened, it gradually gained a devoted following. By 2004, she purchased a building to open a larger location.

The Chitlin Market created a sense of community, Anderson says. "Everybody loved each other there. I have never seen anything like it in my life. When they cross the front of the door, they become family, and when you have two people who don't know each other and have a bowl of chitlins, they're going to talk. That's the power of chitlins." For years, the business stayed busy, hosting neighborhood regulars as well as visiting celebrities. It received accolades in the local and national press.

But Anderson faced challenges, too. According to her 2006 memoir, *Offal Great*, when she sought city and county approvals for the new location, members of the city council voiced their opposition, citing the smell of the restaurant's signature dish. Inspectors made un-

Delphine Lee

scheduled visits, and the building was vandalized. Anderson still pressed on.

In 2006, the restaurant was depicted in a scene of *Commander in Chief*, a short-lived ABC drama that featured Geena Davis as President. Hyattsville officials were concerned that the image of Anderson's business painted the area in a negative light. Peter Shapiro, a former county councilmember, told the *The Washington Post* that the Chitlin Market was a "stereotype of a poor, dangerous black neighborhood." Then-Mayor Bill Gardner, County Executive Jack Johnson, and Representative Steny Hoyer denounced the episode in a press conference.

"When the President of the show gets out of a car and is in front of a restaurant that advertises chitlins and pork chops in today's America, what any right-thinking American knows is we are harking back to an age-old inability of this country to celebrate the leadership and achieve-

ment of African Americans and other diverse people in this country," said a spokesperson for Johnson, who quoted his speech. In a 2006 press release, Anderson said, "Some of us just don't fit into a developer's idea of what's acceptable."

Later that year, the city rezoned the area where her new restaurant was to be located into a residential zone. Anderson was outraged at the unfair assumptions that many people make about chitlins. "Everybody deserves to be able to come to The Chitlin Market and eat chitlins and enjoy the company. We shouldn't have to close a location because of people's lack of knowledge," she said.

Anderson sued the county and other local agencies for \$18 million on the grounds of harassment, tortious interference with contract, and intentional infliction of emotional distress. A judge dismissed the case. "They didn't want chitlins in that area," said Anderson. "It's an old school stigma and it's ignorance, and people take their ignorance all over the place."

For now, the Chitlin Market's legacy is preserved at the Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum.

Anderson now sells cleaned chitlins and a chitlins seasoning blend online. But she's not stopping there. Her dream is to revive Evans Grill, which closed in 1991. As she imagines it, Evans Grill for the Performing Arts would be a place where visitors could learn about African American and Southern cooking along with celebrating music, dance, and performances. And of course, the venue would serve chitlins. 🍖



Shauna Anderson sold chitlins from a mobile trailer while waiting on restaurant permits.

Courtesy Shauna Anderson

Debra Freeman has written for Epicurious, Garden and Gun, Plate Magazine, Southern Grit Magazine, and Gastro Obscura. The Huffington Post, The New York Times, and BBC Radio have featured her work.

Abigail Porter tends the fire on smokers that will cook two hundred pounds of chicken overnight, April 2021.

NOURISH AND FLOURISH

From cookouts to raised beds, Feed Durham NC works to end hunger.

BY KATINA PARKER





Katina Parker plates meals for Community Health Coalition, March 2021.

SINCE APRIL 2020, I’VE FED MORE THAN 50,000 PEOPLE FROM MY FRONT yard through Feed Durham NC, a mutual aid collective I started at the beginning of the COVID-19 shutdown. Every six to eight weeks, we gather on the one-acre corner lot where I live to cook tasty, nutrient-dense meals for upwards of 2,000 neighbors-in-need. Then we donate whatever we don’t cook to local organizers who distribute raw foods through their networks. We’ve served 15,000 meals and given away 35,000 pounds of veggies, fruit, and poultry. We nourish elders, widows, families living in cars and on the streets, those who are homebound or chronically ill, unsupported LGBTQ+ folks, undocumented families, elementary students, and their loved ones. We turn no one away.

Over the last eighteen months, Feed Durham NC has grown from two dozen volunteers to over 400. We are an all-weather crew that prepares food in a temporary outdoor kitchen with the use of 6 trailer smokers, 4 griddles, 10 burners, 3 washing stations, several socially-distanced tents for chopping produce, and a bedroom-sized refrigerator. Our youngest volunteers are a pair of five-year-olds who scrub root veggies with joyful abandon. Our eldest are veteran civil rights organizers well into their seventies.

Feed Durham NC is a Black-, Indigenous-, Queer-, and Trans-led, multiracial coalition. We are filmmakers, organizers, doulas, herbalists, students, educators, farmers, former restaurant workers, parents, and elders.

We insist on high-quality food and high-quality treatment for our most vulnerable neighbors. We understand that hunger is a tool of war and political manipulation. We recognize that eliminating hunger is the first and most critical step to creating a just world in which every child is positioned for healthy outcomes.

PREVIOUS PAGES: Katina Parker; ABOVE: Jasmine Celosia

storage, washing everything down, putting shelves and forty-pound boxes of produce in the fridge trailer. One of our stewards jokes about offering Load-In Day as a CrossFit fundraiser.

We know that we are only as safe, well, and joyful as our least hungry neighbor.

The rise of Feed Durham NC has been an overwhelming, all-consuming, heart-pounding, life-giving, spirit-healing, come full circle, come to fruition, up in the wee hours, pondering prayer of a blur.

We’ve churned out delicious cuisine during two hurricanes, violent lightning storms, profound heat, and bone-chilling cold—tents and tables blowing over while we plate for hungry neighbors; aggressive winds and unprecedented downpours; fingers so numb we have to slide hand warmers inside our gloves to keep chopping; waking up at 4 A.M. to put on the buffet pans we prepped just five hours earlier so vittles can heat, transform, cool and transfer into the fridge trailer by late morning before the temperature climbs to ninety-five degrees; daily runs to the grocery store to purchase dry ice that we pack next to raw chicken so fridge temps remain below thirty-seven degrees.

Somehow—through the steadiness of our commitment; through sheer will, one foot in front of the other; the generosity of beloveds and strangers; and innumerable thoughtful interventions initiated by our stewards (many of whom just happen to travel with circular saws and welding kits)—we pull it off.

We load in on a Wednesday, rain or shine. Gigantic trucks and volunteers’ vehicles hustle in and out of my gravel drive, leaving behind dinosaur-sized cooking gear, thousands of pounds of produce, charcoal, propane. We spend all day assembling the production site, pulling our in-house supplies out of

Thursday, we start with a limited menu of chicken, rice, beans, and a green veg, cooking for the largest mission in North Carolina and making thirty plates which we hand-deliver to unhoused people. Friday, we prep meals for six to nine community partners who distribute individual and family pans door-to-door or on the street, and we add a few more veggie options to the menu.

By Saturday, dozens of volunteers purposefully move through the yard, on-task and happy to be a part of this thing we’re dreaming up as we go. Sunday, we make Gratitude Plates for volunteers, donors, and individual families we’ve agreed to help. We also pack grocery bags and break down the yard. Clean-up continues well into Monday, when several large trucks

We know that we are only as safe, well, and joyful as our least hungry neighbor.

ramble up my gravel drive to collect all the rental equipment, and personal vehicles lumber in to receive grocery bags of uncooked produce and poultry.

Our typical menu is smoked chicken or turkey, herbed rice and beans, and seasonal vegetables—grilled, stewed, or smoked. All meals are gluten-free and nut-free. We offer dairy-free and vegetarian options. Favorites include our roasted beets tropicale (a recipe that intensifies sweetness without adding sugar, while neutralizing the taste of “clean dirt” that turns so many away



Gratitude Plates include chicken, vegetables, rice, and beans, November 2020.

from this magenta powerhouse); and braised butternut squash with agave, cinnamon, and coconut oil. For the chicken, we prepare an elaborate spiritual bath of spices, derived from an old family recipe, and then deep-smoke it overnight using hickory, pecan, maple or apple wood. Other menu items include spicy stewed cabbage, fire-roasted peppers and tomatoes, and seared eggplant. Each meal comes with a colorful, handwritten Love Note, often decorated by the children of volunteers.

My greatest gift has been witnessing volunteers who arrived uncertain and cautious, and watching them find their footing. They stretch their leadership, work their networks, and push themselves to learn new skills because they feel supported, validated, and wanted.

Caleb, Abigail, and Kailey keep me grounded and determined. They showed up in the first hours of our first cookout

and have contributed to every cookout since. Abigail quickly mastered the grid-dling of cabbage, broccoli, and cauliflower. Kailey became expert at spicing and mashing 400 pounds of yams. Caleb has graduated to managing our chicken inventory and preparation. He set up a year-long donation with a local distributor who agreed to gift us three tons of poultry.

Every Friday that we cook, Caleb leads us in Shabbos, a guaranteed opportunity for everyone to express gratitude for who we are and what we're forming together. Each of us, representing many faiths, acknowledge being on Catawba, Occaneechee, and Saponi land as we pray for the healing, safety, and strength of the people we feed.

Bella, a recent Duke grad and budding organizer, crowdfunds and recruits volunteers among her friends. Grayson, who once washed dishes for seven hours

Katrina Parker



Natalie Bullock Brown and a young volunteer plate meals, May 2021.

straight, now manages our bean and rice station. Jas, an emerging filmmaker, documents the drama of each barbecue—scheduling mishaps, inclement weather, mistakes, accidents, and outrageous personality types learning how to move as a cohesive body.

Through our residency program, dozens of organizers have traveled from Chicago, Baltimore, Richmond, Charlotte, and Atlanta to study with us so they can then scale the work for their capacities and communities.

Our partners include shelters and church programs. Individual volunteers leverage word-of-mouth networks to distribute meals to those who don't qualify for "official" forms of support. Our stewards have felt the bittersweet discomfort of being thanked for food by a child who's had to ration with siblings.

We raise about \$10,000 to cover expenses for each cookout. Local businesses

Katrina Parker

and nonprofits donate some of our food and cooking supplies. One day this summer, Durham-based Farmer Foodshare delivered 500 pounds of blueberries and 400 pounds of eggplant to my carport. The boxes and flats were gone within two hours. Our equipment vendors waive delivery fees. NC Green Heat has donated truckloads of cooking wood for our smokers. SpeeDeeQue, a copy shop, gives us thousands of sheets of cardstock printed with our logo so we can write Love Notes. Levin Jewish Community Center of Durham and 9th Street Bakery have gifted hundreds of bread loaves.

Over the past eighteen months, I've witnessed our Feed Durham volunteer family's commitment intensify. I've worked alongside weary volunteers at midnight, sometimes later, loading smokers with chicken and fridges with tray after tray of "ugly" garlic corn,



A Love Note accompanies each meal that Feed Durham NC serves. Betsy Barton made these Love Notes for the March 2021 cookout.

lightly charred broccoli, and savory rice set to go out the next day. I wait up, no matter how late, until I've heard that each volunteer made it home safely. And after each weekend we cook, I've struggled with the knowledge that the thousands of people we've fed will be hungry again soon.

AS 2021 GIVES way to 2022, we're shifting toward disrupting the root causes of hunger. This fall, we'll launch a Neighborhood Service Corps Initiative, through which everyday folks who have time and skill sets will install raised garden beds and grow food in collaboration with neighbors-in-need. We're working to foster a culture of thoughtful giving that shifts unused or dormant resources from middle-class and wealthy communities to under-resourced ones.

Katina Parker is a filmmaker, photographer, writer, and the founder of Feed Durham NC.

We're engaging children to understand and organize against hunger. Through a masterclass video series, we're teaching culturally relevant recipes and meal-preparation techniques to the communities we serve. And we are sharing our

We're working to foster a culture of thoughtful giving.

organizing blueprints so that we can sustain hundreds of thousands of people across the United States. We have the wherewithal and the resources to make life more livable for all the people who are stressed and struggling, in Durham and beyond. I'm leaning into possibility because it keeps me going, and keeps the folks around me going, too. 🍷

Katina Parker

“DON'T DO IT. EXPECT LAWSUITS.”

An excerpt from *Seed Money: Monsanto's Past and Our Food Future*

BY BARTOW J. ELMORE



Photos: Bryce Gray/St. Louis Post-Dispatch via AP

Farmers in the American South may not be able to see the invisible menace as it spreads from field to field, but a chemical vapor has been quietly drifting in the hot summer air over the past few years, damaging everything from fruit orchards to soybean crops. Many Southern growers—especially in Arkansas, one of the epicenters for this problem—are red-hot mad about it. They’ve begun to fight back, calling for the EPA, state officials, or really anybody to step in. For now, dangerous droplets continue to billow into the atmosphere and drift as the wind blows, threatening, as one federal court put it, to “tear the social fabric of farming communities” asunder. Excerpted from my new book, *Seed Money: Monsanto’s Past and Our Food Future* (W. W. Norton), this is the story of how this chemical storm came to be. It’s a historical account that shows how genetic engineering firms sold farmers a food future that is actually a toxic past. That past, of course, is not even past. —BJE

BLACK SUVS VEERED INTO THE parking lot of the Rush Hudson Limbaugh Sr. US Courthouse in Cape Girardeau, Missouri. “It looked like the feds showing up,” recalled Bev Randles, an attorney with the Kansas City firm Randles & Splittgerber. Then in her late forties, Bev was a native of the Show-Me State. She had grown up on a farm just thirty miles from Cape Girardeau. In a way, coming to the courthouse was coming back home.

Thick fog enveloped the area as more than a dozen dark-suited corporate attorneys for German chemical and pharmaceutical companies BASF and Bayer filed out of their vehicles and into the sleek courthouse—a “palace,” Bev called

it—along the banks of the Mississippi River. They were there to meet federal judge Stephen N. Limbaugh Jr., grandson of the famed Missouri attorney for whom the courthouse was named and first cousin to the conservative talk show host most people know. This was Limbaugh country, a little over an hour south of St. Louis in the fertile farmland just north of what Missourians call the “bootheel” of the state.

Something big was going down in this small town, though only a handful of reporters were there to document what was happening. It was January 27, 2020, the start of the *Bader Farms v. Monsanto and BASF* jury trial, and Bev Randles and her husband, Billy, were getting ready to start the biggest case of their lives.

The Randles were representing Bill Bader, a Missouri peach farmer who filed this case back in 2016—roughly a year and a half before Bayer bought Monsanto in a mega-merger that made headlines across the globe. Around that time, Bev Randles had been running for lieutenant governor on the GOP ticket, hoping to become the first Black politician elected to statewide office, when she visited Bader’s farm for a photo op. She had spent enough time around farms to know that Bader’s peaches did not look right. They had curled leaves, and many looked like they were dying. When Bader told



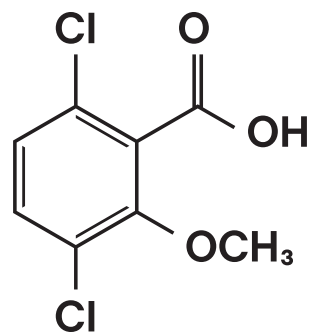
Bill Bader surveys his peach trees for damage, August 2016.

her that he believed an herbicide sold by BASF and Monsanto was to blame, Bev told him she wanted to help.

The herbicide was dicamba, and it was used to fix a problem created years before. Back in the mid-1990s, Monsanto had introduced Roundup Ready technology that made commodity crops—such as soybeans, corn, and cotton—genetically engineered (GE) to be resistant to its blockbuster herbicide, Roundup, which was first commercialized in the 1970s and contained a powerful weed-killing chemical called glyphosate. Farmers had loved the system because it allowed them to spray Roundup throughout the growing season, keeping fields clean of unwanted plants. But within a few years weeds started developing resistance to Monsanto’s herbicide, which is why the company started working feverishly to create crops that would tolerate Roundup and

dicamba, another powerful herbicide that had been around since the 1960s. In 2007, Monsanto acquired from the University of Nebraska the gene sequence that bestowed dicamba resistance to plants, and eight years later Monsanto commercialized its first dicamba-tolerant seeds—branded Roundup Ready Xtend—beginning with cotton in 2015 and then soybeans in 2016.

But there was a problem, and it was a serious one: dicamba was volatile—much more so than Roundup. When soybean and cotton farmers sprayed their fields, this chemical often vaporized—especially in hot temperatures—drifting onto adjacent farms and ecosystems, damaging everything from watermelons to sycamore trees. Farmers without dicamba-tolerant GE crops were incensed, especially fruit farmers like Bill Bader who had no way to avoid damage when



ABOVE: Chemical structure for dicamba, C₈H₆Cl₃O₃; OPPOSITE: Peaches too small to pick are left to wither on the tree at Bader Farms in Dunklin County, MO, August 2016.

farmers nearby sprayed dicamba on their own fields. After all, there was no such thing as a dicamba-tolerant peach tree.

“This is the nastiest litigation I’ve ever been involved in,” Billy Randles said of the trial, which was saying a lot, considering the fact that he had been involved in legal suits where he represented Philip Morris back when cigarette companies were still selling doubt about the link between smoking and cancer. An alumnus of Harvard Law School, Randles had been in practice for thirty years and had even run for governor of Missouri. He was comfortable speaking in front of big audiences, including at the Kansas City church where he moonlighted as a preacher. Nevertheless, Randles and his wife, Bev, had never been lead lawyers for a case this big.

Bayer, now the owner of Monsanto’s technology, was clearly sending its top litigation specialists to Cape Girardeau

to battle a husband-and-wife team whose lawsuit could do real damage to the firm. Recognizing the stakes, Jan Miller, Bayer/Monsanto’s lead attorney, appealed to Judge Limbaugh before the trial to put a gag order in place that would prevent Bader’s legal team from talking to the press. Limbaugh honored the request.

Observers in the gallery may well have been surprised by the judge’s order, but when Billy Randles took to the podium to deliver his opening statement, it quickly became clear why Miller had made his move. As Bev sat pensively at the plaintiff’s desk next to the farmer she had promised to help roughly four years prior, her husband began to lay out a series of internal memoranda and documents that no corporation would want exposed.

“Don’t do it. Expect lawsuits,” concluded a Monsanto employee in a document

summarizing the findings of an advisory panel to Monsanto that Randles cited in the first moments of trial. Monsanto had created the academic review committee in an attempt to get frank feedback about its dicamba system, and the panel had concluded that Monsanto’s seeds were going to wreak havoc, especially for “specialty crop” farmers growing fruits and vegetables. Steve Smith, a tomato grower Monsanto had asked to serve on the panel, claimed dicamba-tolerant crops were the “most serious threat to specialty crops of anything I had seen.” He fired off a blistering email to Monsanto managers saying, “While I know you are hearing the comments I and others are making, I’m not sure you are HEARING.”

Documents showed that Monsanto knew dicamba’s tendency to drift off-target could help them make money. After all, vaporized dicamba could also harm soybean and cotton farmers that did not use Monsanto’s Roundup Ready Xtend traits. If they wanted to protect their crops from dicamba drift, they were going to have to use the company’s new seeds that made crops resistant to both Roundup and dicamba. In 2013, as Monsanto prepared to launch its new product, a company slideshow coached salespeople on how to convince commodity crop growers who were not troubled by Roundup-resistant weeds to buy the new dicamba-tolerant seeds. “Why should I pay for something I don’t need?” a farmer might ask. Push “‘protection’ from your neighbor,” one slide said, revealing that the firm’s officials were not only aware of the implications of drift for neighboring farms and ecosystems but were thinking of it as an asset that would force farmers to purchase company seeds.

In 2013, Monsanto did not have its own dicamba herbicide. German chemical company BASF was the main distributor of dicamba brands, but the Environmental

Protection Agency (EPA) did not grant approval for these BASF-made herbicides to be used on dicamba-tolerant crops during the hot growing season, in part because of concerns about volatility. Not until 2017 would Monsanto introduce an EPA-approved dicamba formulation, called XtendiMax® with VaporGrip®, which it claimed was much less volatile than older dicamba brands.

So when Monsanto first sold its dicamba-tolerant cotton seeds in 2015 and soybeans in 2016, there was no EPA-approved dicamba herbicide that could be

Monsanto kept promoting its Roundup Ready Xtend system, treating the drift problem as a way to sell seeds.

used on these crops during the growing season. Monsanto put pink labels on its seed bags warning farmers not to spray dicamba over their dicamba-tolerant crops, but internal communications revealed that company employees knew what was going to happen. “I . . . get to work with a group of renegades that . . . thinks one sticker is going to keep us out of jail,” said an Xtend team member in a 2015 email. “Let’s face reality,” said Boyd Carey, Monsanto’s point person for dicamba complaints, “Regardless of whether it’s legal or not there will probably be guys who spray dicamba.” BASF had little doubt: “Dicamba demand spike with DT [dicamba-tolerant] traits” read the sales report in 2016.

The eight jurors in the case, mainly working-class people from Missouri, were taking it all in. As Billy Randles said

Workers sort peaches for packing at Bader Farms, August 2016.



in closing statements, they were now the “most informed people in the world” on the dicamba issue, having “seen company documents no one else has ever seen.”

And that included records showing how Monsanto tried to block university access to XtendiMax data. Internal correspondence from 2015 showed that the firm had decided to “pull back some of this academic testing with Xtend and XtendiMax formulations to ensure that these formulations keep a ‘clean’ slate” when going through EPA review. Carey later testified that preventing university weed scientists from analyzing the volatility of a herbicide was extremely rare, maybe a once-in-thirty-year occurrence. Publicly, the company claimed that this was because “of the difficulty in producing quantities that would allow for broad testing.” But internally, that logic was considered a joke. “Ha ha ha,” laughed a Monsanto official in a 2015 email, “Difficulty in producing enough product for field testing. Ha ha ha. Bullshit.”

Plaintiff Bill Bader looked mad. The only man before the judge without a tie, he sat and listened as Randles read confidential company correspondence that showed how the firm planned to deal with his complaints. Bader had called Monsanto when his problems started getting bad in 2015 and 2016, but the company refused to send anyone to come look at what was happening on his farm.

It was all part of the plan. “Do not visit a driftee inquiry if the driftee is not a [Monsanto] customer,” said Carey in a 2017 directive marked highly confidential. Because the company was publicly denying that dicamba drift was really a problem, Carey was careful to write: “Note ‘driftee’ is meant as an internal term only.” It was now all so clear to Bill Bader. Monsanto never intended to respond to his requests for help.

Randles went on, citing another

confidential email in which a Monsanto official joked that a “decent lawyer will have a field day with Mr. Bader” if his case went to trial. The plan was to “point the finger at disease,” which is exactly what Monsanto’s team did, focusing on root rot and other pests on Bader’s farm as key culprits causing peach damage. “Deny, deny, deny,” Carey exclaimed in another Monsanto document. The company had made a policy never to admit that it had a serious drift problem.

But BASF, Monsanto’s partner in this dicamba system, knew how bad things were. Randles put a 2016 company report before the jury: “There must be a huge cloud of dicamba blanketing the Missouri Bootheel,” the report stated. “That ticking time bomb finally exploded. The scope of damage is on a massive scale, and fingers are pointing in all directions from grower to grower.”

Even as the damage got worse, Monsanto kept promoting its Roundup Ready Xtend system. As Randles showed, the firm continued to treat the drift problem as a way to sell seeds. John Cantwell, a Monsanto employee, outlined the strategy in a confidential email: “I think we can significantly grow business and have a positive effect on the outcome of 2017 if we reach out to the driftee people. . . . Most driftee people were interested in the technology and can be . . . turned into new users.”

There was a lot of money to be made in all this. A 2017 Monsanto sales meeting ended with plaudits: “Xtend-deli-cious, invigorating, success, Xtendiful, chaching.”

MILES AWAY FROM Limbaugh country, in the San Francisco Bay Area, retired schoolyard groundskeeper Dewayne “Lee” Johnson was dying. For years, Johnson had sprayed Monsanto’s glyphosate

on weeds for the Benicia Unified School District just north of Berkeley, and on one occasion, a hose exploded, soaking him in Monsanto’s herbicide. In August 2018, Johnson won a landmark case against Monsanto in which a jury determined that Johnson’s chronic Roundup exposure was a “substantial contributing factor” to his non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma. A California appeals court later reduced the \$289 million verdict to \$20.5 million but did not overturn the lower court’s ruling. Thousands of people from all across the country filed similar litigation. By 2020,

During the Vietnam War, Monsanto had been the largest producer of Agent Orange, which had destroyed millions of acres of lush, tropical forest and riddled communities throughout the country with serious health problems.

there were more than 120,000 lawsuits underway or set to be filed.

For Johnson, the outcome was bitter-sweet. A few years earlier, he broke down and cried when he told his young boys that he was diagnosed with cancer. His physicians told him he probably would not make it through 2020. No amount of money would change this fate. But Johnson was hopeful that his case would help others by exposing problems with the world’s most widely used herbicide.

During the trial, Johnson’s attorneys revealed Monsanto papers that had never before been available to the public. The most damaging documents showed that despite Monsanto officials’ claims to the contrary, the firm could not prove its Roundup formulations—now used on more than 90 percent of all soybeans and corn grown in the United States and sprayed over millions of acres of farmland worldwide—were harmless. “You cannot say that Roundup is not a carcinogen,” Monsanto toxicologist Donna Farmer said in a 2003 email, “we have not done the necessary testing on the formulation to make this statement.” Seven years later, the situation was still the same. “With regards to the carcinogenicity of our formulations,” another Monsanto scientist said internally in 2010, “we don’t have such testing on them directly.”

These in-house memos said internally what other scientists were saying publicly: that despite the copious amount of research done on the health effects of glyphosate, many studies did not consider the chemicals called “surfactants” that helped Roundup penetrate plants. This was concerning, especially considering that Monsanto’s own scientists had determined that surfactants (such as polyoxyethylene tallow amine) “are able to increase glyphosate absorption through the skin.” Dr. William Heydens, a Monsanto toxicologist that worked closely with Roundup, had wanted to avoid research that would involve surfactants because “of the potential for this work to blow Roundup risk evaluations (getting a much higher dermal penetration than we’ve ever seen before).”

In 2014, almost twenty years after Roundup Ready technology had been introduced, the World Health Organization’s International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) announced that it would review glyphosate in its next round

of cancer studies. In internal correspondence, Monsanto officials admitted that there was “vulnerability in the area of epidemiology” and “potential vulnerabilities in the other areas that IARC will consider.” “More than just pure bad luck is working against glyphosate.”

What Monsanto scientists refused to publicly admit was that evidence of a problem went back decades. In 1999, a Monsanto-funded study conducted by University of Wales professor James Parry showed that “glyphosate is capable of producing genotoxicity,” or damage to genetic material, in lab animals. Monsanto was clearly not happy with the finding. Dr. Heydens said that he wanted to “find/develop someone” who would be willing to offer a more positive assessment of glyphosate. “Parry is not currently such a person, and it would take quite some time and \$\$\$/studies to get him there.”

When the IARC announced in March 2015 that it had found enough evidence to classify Roundup as a probable human carcinogen, Monsanto set out to “ghost write” articles to try and save its signature herbicide, but not everyone was on board with this. When Monsanto told an ex-employee and consultant for the firm that the company was going to keep his name off a glyphosate paper he worked on, he said “I can’t be a part of deceptive authorship on a presentation or publication. . . . We call that ghost writing and it is unethical.” But others had no problem with the plan. “Ghost wrote cancer review paper Greim et al.,” explained Monsanto’s Dr. David Saltmiras in a summary report of his 2015 accomplishments.

After IARC’s ruling, the EPA quickly moved to conduct a reevaluation of Roundup’s active ingredient, issuing a finding in September 2016 that glyphosate was “not likely to be carcinogenic to humans.” But in 2019, the Centers for

Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) did its own review and delivered more nuanced findings. In a section of an issue paper titled “cancer effects,” the CDC noted that “meta-analyses reported positive associations between glyphosate use and selected lymphohematopoietic cancers.” The CDC also cited several studies that “reported risk ratios greater than 1 for associations between glyphosate exposure and risk of non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma or multiple myeloma.” In 2020, there was no definitive proof that Roundup caused California groundskeeper Lee Johnson’s lymphoma or the cancers of other Roundup litigants, but there were clearly a lot of unanswered questions.

In the end, the jury in the Johnson case did not need irrefutable scientific evidence of the link between glyphosate and cancer. They awarded damages to Johnson despite the discrepancies between the IARC’s and the EPA’s findings. One juror admitted that the way Monsanto meddled with science through ghost writing was something that really bothered him: “They were protecting a product that was very important to the corporation’s bottom line.”

And it continued to be so. Despite the jury verdict, Roundup remained an EPA-approved product, and growers continued to spray it on hundreds of millions of farm acres. In 2019, President Donald Trump’s EPA appointee Andrew Wheeler reaffirmed his agency’s approval of glyphosate, saying, “EPA has found no risks to public health from the current registered uses of glyphosate.” USDA secretary and former Georgia governor Sonny Perdue chimed in: “USDA applauds the EPA’s decision.... If we are going to feed 10 billion people by 2050, we are going to need all the tools at our disposal, which includes the use of glyphosate.”



ON THE OTHER side of the world, in the elegant Centec Tower in downtown Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnamese salespeople were hard at work promoting Monsanto’s Roundup Ready system. In 2014, Monsanto heard the good news that the Vietnamese government had approved the use of genetically engineered seeds in Vietnamese fields. A few months later, Monsanto celebrated the first harvest of Roundup Ready corn in Vietnam’s history. These plants promised big profits. It was yet another triumph in Monsanto’s concerted quest to expand its seed empire into developing countries around the world, one that executives might have celebrated over expensive cocktails at the trendy rooftop bar upstairs.

To accomplish this feat, this seed seller had to overcome its historic image as a harbinger of death. During the Vietnam War, Monsanto had been the largest producer of Agent Orange, which had destroyed millions of acres of lush, tropical forest and riddled communities throughout

the country with serious health problems. As Monsanto’s corn crops rose from the ground in 2015, the US government was still trying to deal with that toxic history, channeling hundreds of millions of American taxpayer dollars toward an expensive cleanup program for hot spots still contaminated by Agent Orange spills that occurred more than four decades earlier. Few Americans knew this was going on. Even fewer knew that Monsanto spent no money on these remediation efforts, though some Vietnamese people had tried hard to force the company to bear responsibility for its role in causing these pollution problems.

A few blocks away from the Centec Tower, Vietnamese citizens and foreign tourists can still visit the War Remnants Museum and read allegations of human deformity caused by Agent Orange. A blind man tapping keys on an electronic piano welcomes guests as they enter the facility, with a sign adjacent to him implying that American herbicide campaigns during the Vietnam War caused his impairment. Upstairs, visitors find a house of horrors: a whole room devoted to suspected Agent Orange tragedies, including deformed fetuses soaking in formaldehyde and gruesome pictures of disfigured men, women, and children purportedly ravaged by America’s chemical storm. Museum curators call war culprits by name, specifically mentioning Monsanto in photographs and display captions.

Back up the street, phone rings as Monsanto salespeople pitch seeds that will bring tremendous volumes of another herbicide, Roundup, to Vietnam. Dicamba will surely follow. 🐦

Excerpted from Seed Money: Monsanto’s Past and Our Food Future. Copyright © 2021 by Bartow J. Elmore. Published by W.W. Norton & Company. All rights reserved.

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Courtesy W.W. Norton & Company



Elegy **FOR A** *School*

*The lunch ladies were
my first role models
in social justice.*

by SILAS HOUSE

Illustrations by

MOLLY BROOKS





GROWING UP, I NEVER WOULD HAVE BELIEVED THAT my elementary school—the center of our community, where we gathered for everything from ballgames to family portraits—would someday be shuttered. I can still conjure all of the life that once lived within the walls of the school, which was built in the 1920s and occupied by people who loved it for more than eighty years.

I left the sanctuary of Lily Elementary School in 1985 when I entered eighth grade at the junior high in town, but I can walk its hallways and visit its classrooms in my mind. I can taste the water from the tall drinking fountain across from the principal's office. I can see the shining basketball and football trophies in the large glass case that greeted us when we entered the front doors. I can smell the textbooks, and the coal that burned in the wintertime. I can hear the cries of the wooden stairs leading down to the dungeon of a boys' bathroom, where the communal urinal looked more like an elongated bathtub mounted to the blackish-gray cinder block walls. I can run across the playground, which

was cut in two by a creek full of crawdads. I can still run my fingers over the spines of all the books in the library, ruled over by the heron-like Mrs. Bill. At the time I thought her stern and foreboding. Now I recall her smiling as she presided over the Scholastic Book Fair or leaned over to offer me a book.

Upon leaving the library and turning left I pass through the hallway of metal lockers whose interiors we decorated with pictures cut from magazines: the cast of *The Outsiders*, Michael Jackson moonwalking, the TV character ALF. There is the stairwell where I received my first kiss from a pretty girl named Tiffany when we were both twelve. She slid her tongue between my teeth and I

reeled back, nearly falling down, looking at her as if she had just eased a knife into my belly. Then she left into the classroom where Sandra Stidham taught my seventh grade English class. One day she read a poem by Edna St. Vincent Millay to us: "What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why." We all laughed at the title, but by the end we had grown quiet. I noticed the beauty of phrases like "the rain is full of ghosts" and "thus in winter stands the lonely tree." When she finished, we saw that there were tears in her eyes. Nobody laughed then. Nobody said a word. I had never seen anyone so moved by literature, and her revelation of vulnerability unlocked a door for me.

But perhaps the most important place of all for us was the lunchroom, which stood unconnected from the school to keep its heat from invading our classrooms throughout the warm months. At the back of the lunchroom, a stainless-steel counter divided us from the lunch ladies, as everyone called them, who served our food. They wore white uniforms, white plastic aprons, and black hairnets. They smiled and joked with us in a way that the teachers never did. Our teachers had been taught that they must change their native way of speaking since they were college graduates, ridding themselves of accents and colloquialisms. The theory at the time in our parts was that children could best succeed if their ruralness, their Appalachian identity, was erased. Teachers were on the front lines of this initiative. Whereas they were expected to be stern, serious, and urbane in their speech and mannerisms, the lunch ladies were kind, jovial, and unapologetically country. They reared back to laugh

with open mouths. They knew us all by name but usually called us by terms of endearment: Honey, Sweetheart, Baby. We were allowed to call them by their first names: Roberta, Cotha, Billie, Sadie, Carolyn. One of them was my mother. Betty.

She had taken the job shortly after I entered the elementary school for two reasons: We needed the income, and she wanted to be near me. Upon learning that my mother worked at my school lunchroom, a few people have asked me if I was ever ashamed of this. It never occurred to me to be embarrassed of her in any way, shape, or form. I was proud of her, especially because the other children loved her. We loved all of the lunch ladies.

Looking back, I understand that they were my first role models in social justice. They were charitable, and they stood up for what they believed in. I saw Carolyn and Sadie slip extra food to the poorer kids. I knew, even though she never told me, that my mother gave money to children whom she had found had some

Whereas the teachers were expected to be stern, serious, and urbane in their speech and mannerisms, the lunch ladies were kind, jovial, and unapologetically country.

specific need. All throughout my elementary school years my mother took them to B&H Shoes or Bob's Ready-to-Wear, where she bought them pairs of PONY high tops or Easter dresses.

My least favorite teacher once caught the poorest boy in my class chewing Fruit Stripe gum. She demanded that he spread the gum across his nose and wear it there the entire day. When we went into the lunchroom, Billie, my mother's closest



By the time I had children of my own, Lily School had been closed and consolidated with another one. The beating heart of the little town was removed, and the life around it has been seeping out ever since.

friend, demanded he tell her why the gum was there. She listened with her hands on her hips, though she already knew the answer. After he explained, she took the hardened gum from his nose and told him that if the teacher had a problem to come see her. She was bucking a strict class hierarchy by stepping in, but that teacher knew better than to say a word to her. Billie was never able to have any children of her own. Later I would find out that she, too, bought many of my peers school clothes or notebooks and crayons. She eventually adopted one of the students.

They made us feel loved, that most important thing for a child. And what better act of loving than to feed someone? The lunchroom food was delicious back then, before the board of education contracted with large food suppliers who mostly sold them prepared meals and canned products. Our lunch ladies prepared almost everything from scratch. The yeast rolls were so perfect they might

have floated up off the plate before us. There was the homemade pizza covered in thick commodity-style cheese, red sauce, and brown blooms of sausage. Soup beans, beef stew, squares of cornbread with real butter, chicken and dumplings, coconut cake. For some of the kids, these were the only hot meals of the day. Always on the last days of school before Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter break they served us heaping mounds of turkey, dressing, mashed potatoes and gravy, fried corn, and bowls of banana pudding with crunchy wafers.

Most of the students didn't realize how hard they worked, but I sometimes got to go back in the kitchen, so I knew that the floors were slick with grease, that the space broiled with the heat from the big ovens and stove. I knew the way their hands shriveled and wrinkled from the scorching dishwater. I saw my mother's swollen ankles and the blisters on her big toes from standing all day. I smelled the scent of bleach she could

Photo of Lily School courtesy of the author

never wash out. Yet we thought the lunch ladies were all having a ball as they cooked and cleaned for us. We saw them push through their days with laughter and jokes and singing, my mother leading them in gospel hymns or Loretta Lynn songs as they mopped and wiped down tables.

All of those women are gone now, except for my mother. The lunchroom was torn down years ago. But I can still move about it as if in a dream.

By the time I had children of my own, the school had been closed and consolidated with another one a few miles down the road. This was cheaper, the school board said, than trying to remodel Lily School into a useable space. The campus stood silent and empty for years. The beating heart of the little town was removed, and the life around it has been seeping out ever since.

I went back there recently and walked around outside. The coal pile was long gone but had left a stain by the basement wall. The river flowed on behind the school, green as the first acorns of summer. Down the entire back wall of the main school building someone had spray-painted DO METH AND HAIL SATAN



HAHAHA. I tried all of the doors, but they had been chained and locked. I peered in through the old windows and saw that the beautiful floor of the gymnasium—once so painstakingly shellacked and polished—was buckling. One of the basketball goals hung askew. I thought I heard the bounce of basketballs, the whoosh of kickballs, the stark whistle of our PE teacher ringing out. The library was empty of books and shelves. The windows to the classroom where Ms. Stidham had given me permission to be passionate about words were too high for me to look into, so it will remain the same in my mind, just as the demolished lunchroom will.

Not long after I visited, a Christian school bought the campus and repaired some of the classrooms. One hundred or so students now attend, but they bring their own lunches. Most of the students do not even live in Lily. There are no 4-H meetings or school dances or cake walks like there used to be at Lily School. The children of Lily are now crowded onto buses and no longer walk to school in laughing groups, the way we did. If I had my way, it would still be a public school, but I am glad the rooms are at least occupied once again; the life there will sustain the old walls for a few more years, even if it will never be the same again.

The lunchroom is gone, but the lessons I learned there remain. Someday the entire school will be gone. One by one the people who walked its hallways when it was Lily School are leaving this world. But for now the boy who first felt the thrill of poetry there, the boy who felt safe when he heard the lunch ladies calling his name—he's still here, and many others who knew that place are, too. 🍷

Silas House is the New York Times bestselling author of six novels, including his most recent, Southernmost. His work has appeared recently in The Atlantic, Time, Ecotone, and many other publications.



COMING HOME

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

BY CALEB JOHNSON
PHOTOS BY IRINA ZHOROV

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

WHEN COLE TELLS SOMEONE SHE GREW UP NEARBY,
THEY OFTEN GET EXCITED TO HEAR SHE'S RETURNED
HOME. OTHERS SEEM CONFUSED AS TO WHY
A YOUNG PERSON WOULD COME BACK TO A RURAL
REGION WHERE THE POPULATION IS IN DECLINE.

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

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

After college and graduate school, Cole

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

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

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

At Abadir's, Cole uses as little refined





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

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

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

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

other purveyors, too.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Caleb Johnson is the author of the novel Treeborne. He teaches writing at Appalachian State University.

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AT LUCKY LIQUOR WITH DORIS AND POOH-POOH

A dive bar on the edge of downtown Shreveport once offered hard blues, cheap beer, and enormous cabbages.

BY CHRIS JAY

LUCKY LIQUOR STANDS AT THE END of an otherwise razed block of Christian Street in downtown Shreveport, Louisiana, an exclamation point on a sentence that has been erased. Vestiges of St. Paul's Bottoms, the neighborhood that once surrounded the bar, are everywhere. Sidewalks dead-end abruptly in blackberry brambles. Flights of concrete stairs rise into meadows.

I became a patron of Lucky Liquor in the late 2000s, sometime after the squat, grey cinder block building, painted with colorful murals of palm trees and martinis, began appearing in the opening credits of the vampire soap opera *True Blood*.

As the popularity of *True Blood* grew, the bar began to attract tourists. On my first visit, bartender Doris Wilson met me at the door. "You looking for vampires out here?" she asked, gesturing toward the camera I always carry.

"Usually, when I see white folks out

here with cameras, it's got something to do with *True Blood*," Wilson explained, raising her voice to be heard above the jukebox. Twenty-five feet from the source of the music, I could feel each bass note through the soles of my sneakers.

"My buddy said he bought a great big cabbage here," I shouted.

Doris nodded. "The cabbages will be here in a minute," she said. "PooH-PooH is on the way."

I took a seat at the bar. Most of the light in the room entered through the glass door. A fixture above the pool table, three video poker machines, and the glow of the jukebox provided the rest.

The murals from outside continued within: palm trees, island sunsets, and sparkling cocktails covered grey walls. Behind the pool table, a man and woman walked along a beach in silhouette. In carefully rendered, flowing letters, the mural

Thomas "PooH-PooH" Butler and Doris Wilson with greens outside Lucky Liquor, 2011.



Shreveport-Bossier Convention and Tourist Bureau



Inside Lucky Liquor, 2018

read: BABY, LET'S GO TO LUCKY LIQUOR.

Patrons sat at an L-shaped bar and at tables surrounding a tiny dance floor. The crowd was mostly older Black men and women in small groups. Couples who wanted to keep to themselves would shoot pool, and there was almost always a game of eight-ball in progress.

In those days, if you wanted to drink in her bar, Doris had to buzz you in. Day and night she sat on a stool within easy reach of a switch that controlled the door. Seats near Wilson's perch came with responsibilities, like exit-row seats on airplanes. Patrons who sat near her helped evaluate new arrivals.

Occasionally, someone would take hold of the door handle who did not pass muster. Maybe they'd caused trouble in the bar on a previous visit or two-timed one of the women in Doris's poker group. She would wave her hand dismissively and shout "Go on!" I was lucky. She let me in.

Thomas "Pooh-Pooh" Butler Jr. arrived shortly after. Doris ran the bar, but

Pooh-Pooh owned it. A native of the town of Plain Dealing, thirty miles away, he stood about six feet, four inches tall. Broad-shouldered and heavysset in a muscular way, he had the largest hands I've ever seen. In his grasp, normal-sized objects appeared tiny: a can of beer from the cooler, a tomato from the garden, or four quarters for the jukebox.

Covered in sweat and soil, he was carrying a beer box overflowing with cabbages, squash, and tomatoes. Regulars gathered around to ogle and barter.

I told Pooh-Pooh about the enormous cabbage that he'd sold my housemate, how we'd eaten it for meal after meal, shared it with friends, and posted about it online. He signaled for me to wait as he retrieved something from his truck.

Pooh-Pooh returned with the wildest-looking cabbage I'd ever seen, a dark green-tendriled monstrosity with unruly outer leaves so large that they nearly obscured his upper body.

"Look at the size of *this* goddamned cabbage!" he shouted.

M.C. Rollo



Thomas "Pooh-Pooh" Butler in 2017

POOH-POOH CAME and went throughout the day, using Lucky Liquor as a homebase from which he managed other businesses, including a long-haul trucking company and the four-acre vegetable garden where he raised that cabbage. Doris always worked the bar.

Pete Fetterman, a regular who hosts a free annual cookout at Lucky Liquor, told me that many of the bar's patrons felt a deep affection for Doris. She was often alone at the bar, where she was the only employee, for hours at a time.

"I'd go just to be there with Doris and catch up with her," Pete said.

Each year on Mother's Day, Pete purchases two flower arrangements: one for his mother and one for Doris. Pete told me about one Mother's Day when a woman who looked to be in her eighties showed up at the bar with her daughter and granddaughter. "They were the only ones at the bar besides me and Doris," he said. "And they were just tearing up the dancefloor right in front of the jukebox, in the middle of the afternoon."

Sometime in the early 2010s, Pooh-Pooh decided to replace the CD jukebox with an Internet-enabled digital jukebox. Saddened by the development, my housemates and I headed downtown for a final evening with the old-fashioned jukebox.

"I stocked it myself," Pooh-Pooh said as we flipped through page after page of CDs. "This is the music that's hard to get around here. I loaded that thing with nothing but the hard blues."

To Pooh-Pooh, "the hard blues" meant artists like Otis Rush who belted out slow-burning stories of secret love affairs over the wail of electric guitars. Pooh-Pooh's personal curation of the jukebox was, like the tropical murals and locked door, another way of protecting the bar from the influence of the outside world.

The jukebox was so loud that patrons would often go outside to carry on conversations. Communicating inside the bar required forehead-to-forehead proximity. Much of the atmosphere of the place was dictated by the jukebox—by its

remarkable contents and its extraordinary loudness.

My friends and I worried about the implications of a fancy Internet jukebox. We were right to worry. After Pooh-Pooh made the change, a friend of mine spent a snakebit afternoon at Lucky Liquor. He'd settled in at the bar and had cracked open his quart of beer when a patron slipped a five-dollar bill into the new jukebox and cued up the Original Broadway Cast Recording of Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Cats*. By the fifth song, regulars had begun angrily tossing tips on the bar and leaving.

As my friend headed toward the door, he glimpsed a lone woman on the dance-floor, swaying to the maudlin chords of "Memory."

I have no recollection of the last time I got to visit with Doris and Pooh-Pooh at Lucky Liquor. At the time, that was just another trip to the bar. I mentioned this to Pete, and he reported a similar regret: "When I look back on all of the beautiful memories, it all becomes the same event."

Pooh-Pooh Butler died from complications of COVID-19 on July 26, 2020. Shaken by the loss of her friend and employer, Doris Wilson has not returned to the bar where she worked six days a week for thirty-four years. Pooh-Pooh's son, Thomas "Tank" Butler III, reopened the bar this past June.

In July, I visited Lucky Liquor for the first time since Pooh-Pooh died and Doris stepped away from the bar she ran for so long. When I pulled on the door, I was surprised to feel it give way without waiting for the familiar buzz. A Top 40 tune blared out of the TouchTunes-branded jukebox, its green and purple lights



Exterior mural at Lucky Liquor

flashing in a mostly empty bar.

Tank and I stepped outside to talk.

He told me that the community of Lucky Liquor regulars had accepted him "with open arms" when he found himself thrust into the role of bar owner, a role that he had never envisioned for himself.

"Every time I see people coming in here, I smile," he said. "I'm glad to see these folks getting back together."

I asked him what had become of his father's garden just off of Interstate 20 in Bossier City. He winced at the mention of the garden.

"We're trying," he said. "One step at a time."

He may be occupied with the bar for the time being, but it's easy to imagine a day when Tank will walk through the door of Lucky Liquor, covered in sweat and soil, carrying a beer box overflowing with cabbages, squash, and tomatoes. 🍷

Chris Jay is a freelance writer based in Shreveport. His work has appeared in 64 Parishes, Louisiana Life, and Country Roads Magazine. He publishes Stuffed & Busted, a website that chronicles the culinary history of north Louisiana.

Shreveport-Bossier Convention and Tourist Bureau



PHOTO ESSAY

DETAILS IN PLACE

It's the little things.

PHOTOS BY BITA HONARVAR

I LOVE TO DOCUMENT RHYTHMS AND PATTERNS, the choreography of man and nature.

When I capture images, I focus on fleeting moments: small, telling details that lend light and nuance to a larger story.

A radiant smile reveals a bold grill and a person utterly comfortable in her own skin. A young girl at the state fair finds a souvenir belt that melds fashion and identity. Birds co-opt an aged sign, turning their rundown perch into art. The tiny fingers of a juvenile eastern hellbender salamander curl around those of the biologist working to save it.

Sometimes, to get the big picture, you have to focus on life's little things. —BH

Bitá Honarvar previously worked as a photojournalist and editor for The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. She serves as Gravy's image editor and works as a freelance photographer and editor.



SCENES FROM SPRING CREEK

A glimpse of hope on Florida's Forgotten Coast

BY ANNEMARIE ANDERSON



Cannon Gregg stands on a fallen cypress tree in Spring Creek.

IN EARLY MAY 2021, I PULLED UP TO THE SPRING CREEK RESTAURANT in Wakulla County, Florida. If I had driven another hundred yards, I would have rolled my car straight into Apalachee Bay. The small fishing village of Spring Creek nestles against the bay, protecting the mainland from the expansive Gulf of Mexico. Spring Creek Restaurant closed after Hurricane Michael flooded it in 2018. The cement block building was squat and sturdy, built for surviving hurricanes. The low-slung heft of the restaurant blended into its surroundings. It belonged there just like the palmettos and the swags of Spanish moss hanging from live-oak branches. The oak leaves carpeted the ground around the building.

In the decade and a half since SFA's first oral historian, Amy C. Evans, documented Florida's Forgotten Coast, much has changed. For a variety of reasons, oyster populations have plummeted. In response to this steep decline, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission closed wild oyster harvests in Apalachicola Bay in 2020 through 2025. Sitting to its west, Apalachee Bay was deeply connected to Apalachicola's oyster economy. Most coverage of the oyster industry in this part of Florida tells a story of loss. But what if, rather than an ending, I had the opportunity to document a new beginning?

In 2014, Florida legalized oyster farming. Cultivation techniques vary, but here in Apalachee Bay, oyster farmers typically use bags or cages suspended a foot or so beneath the surface. They lease state-owned sections of the bay, known as sovereign submerged land.

Much of the activity in Spring Creek centers around the restaurant. Previously a beloved destination, it drew tourists from all over North Florida, Georgia, and Alabama to eat and fish. An adjacent building on the property contained a handful of rooms for overnight guests. People from South Georgia and North Florida came to sportfish and stock their freezers full of their catch for the coming year. It wasn't fancy. It was a place where visitors spent a few pleasant days out of the year and, for a few commercial fishermen in the

community, it was the point of departure to provide a living for their families.

On this May day, I met oyster farmers Cainnon Gregg of Pelican Oyster Company and Jody Houck of Cypress Point Oyster Company. They process their oysters in the kitchen of the old Spring Creek Restaurant, which Jody and her husband, Dewey Houck, recently purchased.

It was chilly. I had on a pair of tennis shoes, shorts, and a long-sleeved shirt. Jody grabbed a rain slicker out of her room and handed it to me. We loaded into the Carolina skiff docked in the restaurant's boat slip and headed to Jody's lease. Rows of mesh bags suspended by pontoons marked the spot. As Cainnon held the line, Jody selected a few dozen market-sized oysters for a customer. Though they operate separate businesses, Cainnon and Jody consider themselves colleagues, not rivals. The order filled, we cruised back to shore.

The orange rain slickers my hosts wore stood out in the green grass of the saltmarsh. Cainnon compared the landscape to Jurassic Park. Cabbage palms soared up thickly from the tall grass. The boat loitered, and I looked out around us. Scraps of rope dug into the trunks of cabbage palms where fishermen had tethered their boats in advance of Hurricane Michael. A few clumps of wild oysters grew on a fiberglass hull submerged under a thick layer of marsh mud. Cormorants and brown pelicans

perched on palms and poles.

The Apalachicola National Forest takes up more than one-third of Wakulla county. St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge hugs the coastline and stretches into two adjacent counties, further protecting the ecosystem. Fourteen freshwater springs bubble from the Florida aquifer into the saltmarshes, giving Spring Creek its name. In times of drought, my hosts told me, the aquifer sucks salty water out of the bay, frantically attempting to replenish its underground storehouse.

Towering longleaf pines shield the saltmarshes. When fire crews perform routine controlled burns at St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge, charred vegetation washes into the bay. The oysters filter the ash-steeped water and take on a pleasantly smoky, pickled flavor,

Cainnon told me. When the manatee grass floats up from the seabed in great clumps, the lease turns into a bouillon bath. He swears that the seagrass imparts a dashi flavor to the oysters in his pillow bags.

Puttering out to his lease later that day, Cainnon stopped the boat. A spring burbles at the bay floor, welling gently at the surface. This spring is called Cold Hole, Cainnon told me. "It's not on any map," he said. "Technically, it doesn't exist, but it's here." I was taken with this thin line between existence and nonexistence; reality and imagination; familiar and strange.

BACK HOME IN Mississippi, summer 2021 was a sticky disappointment. My dog died, my husband had an emergency

Cainnon Gregg holds the line as intern Maegan Polk unclasps a mesh oyster bag.





ABOVE: Spring Creek Restaurant; RIGHT: Waders and rain jackets hang in the Spring Creek boat slip.

appendectomy, and the Delta variant drove a surge in COVID cases. Between trips to Florida, I worked on a project with restaurant owners who struggled to run their businesses in a time of hiring shortages and great demand. The summer months left me with a deep ambivalence about my role. What are the best safety precautions? Am I being as responsible as possible? Should these stories be told now, or should I wait?

Thoughts of Cold Hole and Spring Creek kept me going. Our past stretches clearly backwards, and the future is a gaping unknown. The present was a small bridge between the two. Cainnon, Jody, and the rest of the Spring Creek crew stood firmly on that bridge. Their

presence was a question: *What if?*

What if we thought of a new way to make a living in the Bay? What if we thought of another use for this place that once was full of so much life? What if we did what we could to meet change in the place we claim?

When I returned to Spring Creek at the beginning of August, the restaurant echoed with the thumps of hammers and pops of staple guns. Jody and Dewey Houck had plans to use part of the building as a community center. They imagined renting the hotel rooms once again. Cainnon was helping a new oyster farmer set up his lease. The buzz of activity sounded like an answer to the questions I had. 🍷

Annemarie Anderson is SFA's oral historian. She is pursuing an MFA in documentary expression at the University of Mississippi. You can follow Cainnon Gregg's and Jody Houck's work on Instagram at @pelicanoysterco and @cypresspointoysterco.



Disaster Relief

DEMON VERNON PULLS UP A POT OF BOILING SEAFOOD on Wednesday, September 8, 2021. He and others cooked and served food at the site of a former McDonalds at the corner of Morrison and Dowman roads in New Orleans East. They helped neighbors in need following Hurricane Ida.

CHRIS GRANGER, *Photographer*

Photo by Chris Granger | The Times-Picayune | The New Orleans Advocate

An audio player interface for 'SFA Gravy'. It features a green background with a dark blue diagonal banner in the top left corner that says 'Listen & Subscribe'. The main content area is a white rounded rectangle containing the SFA logo (a white bowl with 'SFA' inside) and the word 'GRAVY' in large, bold, blue letters. Below the title is a progress bar with a white slider dot, showing '10:00' on the left and '-10:00' on the right. Underneath the progress bar are three blue icons: a circular arrow (refresh), a vertical bar (pause), and another circular arrow (refresh). Below these icons is the text 'Stories of the Changing American South' and a volume control bar with a speaker icon on the right.



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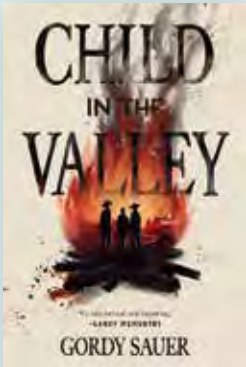
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AUGUST 24
CHILD IN THE VALLEY

GORDY SAUER

A Most Anticipated Book of August from Lambda Literary

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SEPTEMBER 7
REPARATIONS NOW!

ASHLEY M. JONES

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OCTOBER 5
WE IMAGINED IT WAS RAIN

ANDREW SIEGRIST

“Siegrist’s atmospheric, fluid, and merciful prose proves irresistible.”

—Kirkus Reviews

ALSO FROM HUB CITY PRESS

