



# Gravy

Tracing the evolution of cornbread from suppone to spoonbread is in some ways similar to studying history through an examination of fossils and other artifacts.

-John Egerton

NUMBER 27, WINTER 2008

NEWS FROM THE SOUTHERN FOODWAYS ALLIANCE

## Meet Todd Richards: 2007 Glory Foods Chef Scholarship Recipient

by Angie Mosier

"You know, a lot of African Americans just don't choose to go to Mississippi. We don't look at a map and decide to go there; in fact, we have pretty much avoided it. When I found out that I was going to Oxford as the Glory Foods Chef Scholarship recipient, I thought, 'That's great news—I get to go to Mississippi as a special guest. That's a big deal.' It broke through a little invisible barrier for me, and I loved my time there."

Chef Todd Richards, although young at 36, has been around the stove for a long time. He started working in kitchens when he was 14 years old. Before that, he was standing beside his father, helping to prepare family meals and learning that food brought people together. Richards loved creating something delicious for his family, was inspired by visits to restaurants, and decided to make a career out of cooking. Since then he has worked his way through the gauntlet of line and prep, sauté, fry, grill, and garde manger; has worked in casual restaurants, done a stint as a cooking school teacher, cooked in fine dining establishments, and even battled on the *Iron Chef America* stage. To say he gets around good in the kitchen would be an understatement.

Currently Richards is the Executive Chef at Louisville's handsome Oak Room, within the historic Seelbach Hotel. He strikes an elegant form in his chef whites, and he takes food and flavor seriously. He also takes location and history seriously too; he knows who he is, where he is, and where he comes from. While his haute plates at the Oak Room fetch a good price, he is excited to think that there might be a return to regular folks cooking real food. "I believe that there is a cooking renaissance happening—that people see the need for a down-home meal. I hear talk about comfort food, and to me it translates to more than just what is on the plate; I believe that people really need comfort right now—socially, economically, politically, and physically. Home-style comfort food helps with

some of that. While I love cooking high-end food, I am happy to see people turn to traditional comfort food to bring some joy to their lives."

This past October, when Richards crossed the Mississippi state line and joined the SFA at the annual symposium, he was pleased to find a group that was thoughtful about food. Jessica Harris's homage to the late-great black chefs of early America stirred Richards, and he had more than a couple of people turning around to wink at him when she asked "Where are our great Black American chefs today?"

"I really felt like the entire group that was in attendance at the symposium was there in a spirit of not just fun and eating, but in a spirit of learning and also reconciliation. I felt like we all have the same concerns when it comes to food and culture. Of course, y'all are crazy too—I mean to sit on the top of an open-air bus in the freezing cold to get some catfish was extreme, but it was fun and everyone was so nice and welcomed me to the group."

Richards knows that the SFA is a lively organization and does important documentary work, but he also gets our real desire to "gather at the table in a spirit of reconciliation." He understands that many times there are barriers and stigmas that African Americans have to get through to feel comfortable "back in the kitchen." He is proud to work in an industry that not only provides jobs to ambitious young black women and men, but could also become a place of honor and stature—a trade that provides a catalyst for working things out. "When you sit down and eat together, you have to talk. If you have a problem with someone at the table, it gets talked about and hopefully worked out. The world's problems could be solved over a dinner table. I believe that's true and I am happy to be a part of something that can heal that way."

## ➤ GRAVY ◀

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## The SFA Calendar

The lottery for the annual SFA symposium is the bane of our existence. We hate turning people away from our collective table. But we also believe that expanding the attendance beyond the current limit of around 250 people would negatively impact the quality of interaction among symposiasts.

And so, a few years back, your board of directors began expanding its roster of events. We have added Potlikker Film Festivals (3 to 4 hour romps of film, food, poetry, and music), as well as Camps (same mix, more experiential, and one to two days long) and Field Trips (less self-directed, and longer, say 2 to 3 days). And then there are lagniappe events, like the annual Taste of the South shindig at Blackberry Farm (which raised \$62,000 for the SFA this year!).

This edition of *Gravy* should hit the mail around the same time we roll into Birmingham for the latest edition of our Potlikker Film Festival, set for February 23. Look for details at [www.southernfoodways.com](http://www.southernfoodways.com). Following is the lineup of coming attractions; it's by no means complete, but it's what we know for sure, more or less:

**MARCH 28-29:** High Museum Wine Auction ([www.atlanta-wineauction.org](http://www.atlanta-wineauction.org)) featuring a Cork and Pork Seminar (with poet Kevin Young) and a grand dinner with, among others, Mike Lata and Kathryn King.

**MAY 23-25:** Camp Chicago, an examination of what happens when Southern culture (and Southern cookery) decamps for the North. Expect blues. Expect barbecue. Expect to ride the El and hang at West Town Tavern and the Hideout.

**MAY 29-JUNE 1:** Franklin Food and Spirits Festival. Staged—in Tennessee—by our friends at Jim 'N Nick's, this first-time event is taking shape rapidly. Like the High Museum event and the Blackberry Farm event, the SFA is consulting on content but not running the show.

**JUNE 7-8:** Big Apple Barbecue Block Party. Eat 'cue on the streets of NYC. Watch a Joe York film about mutton: [www.bigapplebbq.org](http://www.bigapplebbq.org)

**JULY 11-13:** Louisville: Blue Grass and Brown Whiskey. We'll pay homage to Kentucky farmers, fry fish in Germantown, learn to play the game of dainty, and cook from the *Blue Grass Cookbook*.

**SEPTEMBER 10:** Viking Range Lecture at the University of Mississippi. Featuring Bich Nguyen, author of *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*, and Monique Truong, author of the *Book of Salt*. Free admission. Overby Center.

**OCTOBER 22-23:** Delta Divertissement, Greenwood, Mississippi. Our annual debauch in the Delta is the ever popular prequel to the symposium. Our H.Q. is the Alluvian Hotel; our intent is experiential learning.

**OCTOBER 23-26:** 11th Southern Foodways Symposium, Oxford, Mississippi. Our focus this year is "drinkways." We'll start with water; move on through iced tea, buttermilk, and beer; and, of course, talk of (and sample) wine and whiskey.

**JANUARY 8-11:** Taste of the South SFA benefit, and the annual gathering of the Fellowship of Southern Farmers, Chefs, and Artisans, at Blackberry Farm in Walland, Tennessee, in the Foothills of the Great Smokies. New for 2009 are reduced SFA rates on lodging.

## Letter from the President: Southern Food 101

You know the response you will get when you tell your family and friends that you are headed to a symposium, a day camp, or a field trip on Southern foodways. “What’s a foodway?” they ask. You carefully explain, “Foodways (plural) is the study of food. *Webster’s* defines it as the eating habits and culinary practices of a people, region, or historical period. Folklorist Charles Camp defines foodways as the intersection of food and culture.” Your friends listen politely and say, “Gee, I wish I could go to that kind of conference!”

Now, imagine you are a college student. Your parents call and ask what courses you plan to take this semester. You tell them about an interesting seminar that explores regional foodways in America. There is a dull silence on the other end of the line. Then a giggle follows. “Come on—tell me what courses you are really taking.”

Sigh.

Why do people have such a hard time taking the study of food seriously? Could it have something to do with its “dailiness,” or perhaps its association with women? Maybe it is simply too interesting to be considered worthy of study!

There’s no question today that food IS worthy of study in the academy. More and more institutions of higher learning offer food-related courses in both the social sciences and the humanities. I teach an American Studies seminar at

UNC at Chapel Hill, entitled “Cooking Up a Storm: Exploring Food in American Culture.” My colleagues in anthropology, geography, and the honors’ program at UNC also explore the cultural history and importance of food in their courses. Indiana University recently announced a new Ph.D. program in the anthropology of food—the first program of its kind in the world.

We are all proud of the important contributions that the SFA has made for nearly 10 years to the field of foodways studies. In the coming months, you will learn about exciting new foodways courses to be taught at the University of Mississippi in collaboration with the SFA and the Center for the Study of Southern Culture. Our symposia already feel like a “mini-degree” program in Southern foodways, so it is high time to start offering courses for credit in the university curriculum. We will keep you posted on these exciting plans.

I look forward to seeing you at SFA programs throughout 2008. We have a full schedule of terrific events, so please join us and continue your education in Southern foodways!

All the best,

Marcie Cohen Ferris  
UNC at Chapel Hill

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## Vegetarian Soul Food?

by Timothy Davis

There’s an old *Sanford and Son* episode (“Funny, You Don’t Look It”) in which that show’s grumpy protagonist Fred G. Sanford, tired of everyone walking all over him, proclaims himself the king of his salvage empire. Always eager to help out, Fred’s pal Bubba suggests that Fred pay a local company to trace his roots. Fred is, as it turns out, descended from kings: Ethiopian Jewish African kings, that is. Hilarity ensues as Fred traces his ancestry (which, as it turns out, is nothing more than a scam). And viewers learn a valuable, tied-up-in-22 lesson: never judge a black junkman by his Judaica.

Which, in an admittedly roundabout sort of way, brings me to Charleston’s Soul Vegetarian Cafe and Exodus Takeout, a restaurant that conjures Garvey as readily as it does gravy. Run by the African Hebrew Israelites, Soul Vegetarian’s cuisine is more or less soul food—African in origin, like so much of the area’s cuisine—except sans the meat stuffs. The only vegan restaurant in North Charleston, Soul is located behind a day care center on Rivers Avenue.

What’s on the menu? Garlicky mac and cheese, black-eyed peas, kale, collards, candied sweet potatoes, cornbread, blueberry cheesecake, and pineapple upside down cake. And barbecue tofu. Those who don’t like tofu, made of the ever-Southern soybean, have yet to have it cooked properly. There’s also vegan lasagna, vegan gyros (admittedly not all that Southern, but then again, we do have a large Greek

population), tofu falafels, a barbecued “twist” on whole wheat pita served with medium spicy sauce and homemade mustard, and more. Perhaps the biggest shocker? Nothing is made with milk or meat, and nothing is fried. Lunches usually are under \$10 a person—drink and dessert included—and dinner’s only a couple bucks more.

It might not seem that Southern, eating vegan and all, but it’s also probably more common than you think, especially in larger, college-centric towns like Charleston. Then again, if doing what you want—for the reasons that you want, when you want—but also keeping the larger community around you in mind is also what it means to be Southern, well, Soul Vegetarian South is about as Southern as it gets. Vegetarians and vegans have souls too.

The African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem Community’s Soul Vegetarian South Complex: 3225-A Rivers Avenue in North Charleston, South Carolina. Phone: 843-744-1155.



## Gumbo Tales: Finding My Place at the New Orleans Table

By Sara Roahen, W. W. Norton & Co., 2008, \$24.95.



The best writing about food grows from a place and a personality, and Sara Roahen's book is a wonderful example of the intersection of the three. Roahen, a Wisconsin native, came to New Orleans so her husband Matt could attend medical school at Tulane. She immediately fell in love with the cooking of the city and resolved not only to eat as much of it as possible, but also to understand it.

The opening chapter on gumbo chronicles her transforming experience with this definitive New Orleans dish from her initial anxiety "into curiosity and even desire"—a good summary of her method as she explores sazeracs, sno-balls, po-boys, mirlitons, crawfish, oysters, red beans and rice, café au lait, pho (yes, pho), ya-ka-mein, and other delicacies of her adopted city.

She explores by eating, joyfully and obsessively eating, by reading the requisite literature, and, most important, by getting to know the people who have grown up on and continue to cook this traditional and evolving cuisine. It's a

cast of characters that includes Miss Dot, who presides over Domilise's; Ashely Hansen, who now runs her family's Sno-Bliz shop; Marie Fagot, who prepared a traditional Sicilian St. Joseph's Day dinner for 400 of her neighbors and friends every year; and Pableaux Johnson, who cooks red beans and rice for a revolving group of lucky friends every Monday evening.

The most appealing of this appealing cast is Sara Roahen herself, who takes obvious joy in her subject. Sara Roahen the narrator is much like the Sara Roahen many of us have come to know at Southern Foodways Alliance events—friendly and open, appealingly self deprecating, inquisitive with just the right amount of obsession, intelligent, finely observant, and never snide. She not only makes you want to go to New Orleans and eat, but to eat with her. (Disclosure: Roahen serves on the SFA board.)

Hurricane Katrina interrupted Roahen's writing and research for *Gumbo Days*, and a sense of loss, sometimes temporary, sometimes permanent, runs through this book. No matter, Roahen has faith that "a flood cannot destroy the most interesting and ingrained food culture in my country," and that New Orleans will continue to teach us "about connecting with people by cooking and eating together."

—Tom Head



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