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# Gravy



WOMEN AT WORK

A FOOD  
QUARTERLY

FROM THE SOUTHERN  
FOODWAYS ALLIANCE



PUBLICATION OF GRAVY IS UNDERWRITTEN BY MOUNTAIN VALLEY SPRING WATER

# Gravy

DOCUMENT • STUDY • CELEBRATE

## ABOUT GRAVY

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

2013 IS THE SOUTHERN FOODWAYS ALLIANCE'S YEAR OF WOMEN AT WORK. All year, we've dedicated our efforts—from oral history to events—to highlighting female artisans, chefs, restaurateurs, line cooks, pitmasters, bartenders, oyster shuckers, farmers, and street food vendors whose stories turn that barefoot-in-the-kitchen stereotype on its head. In this issue of *Gravy*, we introduce you to home cooks and entrepreneurs alike. These are stories you won't find anywhere else, partly because these women aren't as famous as we think they deserve to be. We feature them here because they remind us that the South is home to a wealth of female grit and talent worth celebrating.

— Sara Camp Arnold





# I COULD HAVE BEEN A PIONEER WOMAN, EASILY

*As told to Sara Roahen by Sharon Benton*



*Sharon Benton married the country ham and bacon curer Allan Benton, of Madisonville, Tennessee, right around the time he left the schoolhouse for the smokehouse. Over the ensuing decades, and over her own long career in education, she has contributed to her family and community in ways that are comparable to her husband's hard work but may go unrecognized by people who merely know Sharon as the ham-maker's wife. Let her story, as told to Sara Roahen, represent the countless others of her ilk.*

I'M THE SUPERVISOR of curriculum and instruction in Monroe County. When Allan and I met, my ambition was to become a nurse. In those days, you didn't aspire to become a doctor or a lawyer—females didn't, at least. Allan was in education, and he said, "If you go into education, someday we'll both have summers off." And I thought that sounded good. Not exactly what happened! I've enjoyed education, though.

When we started dating, in 1973, he had just gone into the country ham business. At the time, I liked that he was a hard worker and was ambitious and not willing to be just status quo as far as income was concerned. That was his main reason for getting out of education: the income. He had just finished his master's degree, and when he got his first pay stub it hit him: "Good grief, I've been going to school all this time, and I get just this much of a raise?"

He's always worked six days a week. We've only been on maybe seven vacations. In the '70s, going to Myrtle Beach was as big as it got around here. I can't remember how many days into our honeymoon we were, but Allan called his dad, who was overlooking the ham business. I could just tell he was bothered. I said, "It sounds like maybe you need to go back. Would you feel better if we just went on back?" "Yeah, yeah, I probably would." So we came home.

After our daughter Suzanne came in 1980, I was home for almost ten years. My kids are close together—Suzanne and Elizabeth are fifteen months apart, and then Darrell is twenty-five months after Elizabeth. At that time, we weren't really making any money. We were barely surviving. You start trying to pay for daycare for three kids, and we just felt it was more beneficial for me to be home with them. There were days when I would have loved to have an adult conversation. But looking back on it, it was priceless.

I'm not lazy, so I made the girls dresses for church. I made Darrell little suits. I felt like I had to do something to contribute to the family since I was getting to stay home. I felt guilty about it, really. Especially in the fall and around the holidays, when Allan would be swamped, I'd go down and help ship packages. I would make cheese balls at Christmas, and he would take them to the business and sell them. It was a way for me to feel like I was contributing.

I was from the old school like my mom. I had seen her cook a five-course meal every night—meat and vegetables and bread and dessert every night—and that's what I thought I was supposed to do. And that's what I did.

We'd have the bacon a lot, especially in the summers. We might have BLTs. And we'd have ham and fried potatoes. We'd mostly have it on Sundays. I really love Allan's sausage. I make my own pizza, and I love homemade biscuits and sawmill gravy—it's just cream, flour, and sausage grease.

Allan and I put a garden out the very first year we were married. It was before people were talking about chemicals on your food, but that's why we put a garden out: We didn't want all that stuff on our food, even then. In the summers I canned green beans, I froze corn, made pickles—all that typical housewife-y stuff that people used to do. And I still do. I loved it. I could have been a pioneer woman, easily. I would go out and pick blackberries on the side of the road somewhere and make blackberry jam, just because we liked it.

At one point I had an appendectomy. I came home, and it was in the summer, and I was down in the garden picking the cucumbers—because, of course, Allan hadn't picked them while I was gone. And he came down there asking, "What are you doing? You're just a hunter and gatherer!" He was upset with me for being down there, and I'm sure he should have been, but oh, it made me so mad. I was furious. And I kept picking and I thought, "Huh. That's an okay thing to be: a hunter and gatherer." Because I really am!

You could never count on when Allan was coming home, but his hours were more consistent and earlier then. He didn't have Internet orders or restaurants, really. David Chang [of Momofuku] hadn't heard of us yet! All of that made a difference. Now when people

come in to the business, they want to talk to Allan. So whatever work or paperwork he has to do, a lot of times he has to do that after the business closes.

One of the reasons it was important for me to go back to work was the insurance. When I went back to work in 1988, we were paying like \$12,000 a year for family coverage. It even sounds high to me today. My salary definitely was important.

Did Allan know how lucky he was to have a wife like me? We just both, I think, thought that's how it was supposed to be. That sounds really old-fashioned, doesn't it? I'm very much a traditionalist and a conservative, and I guess both of us are. I have high expectations for myself. I think I passed that onto my kids, too. 🍵

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PHOTO, PAGE 2, by Sara Roahen

PHOTO, BELOW, by beall + thomas photography



# HILDA'S ICEBOX PICKLES

*The pickles that made me like pickles*

*by Steven Satterfield*



MY GRANDMOTHER, Hilda Duckworth, spent her entire life in Asheville, North Carolina. She was the best home cook I've ever known. Growing up, these were the pickles that made me like pickles. The only difference is that she used to peel the skin off, but I find the skin enjoyable if you use small pickling or Kirby cucumbers. Whenever my cousins or other family members come into Miller Union, they always ask for a plate of Hilda's Icebox Pickles. Crisp, tangy, but not too sharp, they are completely addictive.

*Fills a one-gallon container*

3 pounds pickling cucumbers, washed and quartered  
1 yellow onion, peeled, halved and cut into crescents  
4 cloves of garlic, peeled and quartered  
4 cups distilled white vinegar  
4 cups water  
¼ cup kosher salt  
2 teaspoons coarsely ground pepper

In a gallon container, combine the salt, pepper, water, and vinegar. Stir briskly to dissolve the salt. Add the cucumbers, onions, and garlic, and then cover and refrigerate. Do not heat any of the ingredients. These are best after being allowed to sit for two days in the refrigerator. Enjoy them within two weeks' time. 🥒

*Steven Satterfield is the chef and co-owner of Miller Union restaurant in Atlanta, Georgia.*

*PAINTING, LEFT A Season of Moment (detail) by Glennray Tutor. Reprinted courtesy of the artist.*

# THE ART OF COOKBOOK MARGINALIA

*A family history, in shorthand and scribbles*

*by Sarah Baird*

*A few greasy looking smears  
and next to them, written in soft pencil-  
by a beautiful girl, I could tell,  
whom I would never meet-  
“Pardon the egg salad stains, but I’m in love.”  
—from “Marginalia,” by Billy Collins*

I AM THE DAUGHTER OF A LIBRARIAN. Growing up, the leaning stacks of novels and winding shelves of yellowing flea-market hardbacks were like siblings for me. Each work of fiction, every biography, held a charming origin story or anecdote about how it came to occupy its current place next to the living-room ficus tree.

As with any relative, I treated these books with a kind of reverent courtesy. No dog-earring pages. No using a copy of *The Great Santini* as a makeshift coaster. And absolutely no writing, highlighting, or foreign script penciled inside even the most frayed dust jackets.

Cookbooks, though, were a different story.



Across the South—and in my Kentucky home—the marginalia bordering recipes, filling in the white spaces of tattered cookbook pages thumbed over time and time again, are as much a part of those texts as the recipes themselves: miniature vignettes of familial life. Culinary love letters passed down through generations, cookbook marginalia tell the tales of the perfect punch for sweltering June weddings, that Aunt Ruby loves extra raisins in her oatmeal cookies, and just how much bourbon a ham marinade really needs.

Recipe changes, trial-and-error additions, and ratio shifts fussily marked down in diagonal pencil swaths stripe the most notable cookbook of my childhood: *Talk About Good!* (1967 edition), by the Service League of Lafayette, Louisiana. No one is quite sure how this particular recipe collection found its way to our family’s culinary library: Neither my grandmother, the cookbook’s original owner, nor my mother had ever been to Lafayette. Yet its fade-resistant, fluorescent yellow jacket and cracked and creviced spine became the backbone of simple weeknight dinners and hallmark meals.

My maternal grandmother's lithe, delicate notations about half-cups of cake flour and my mother's bold directives on service make the cookbook a character study. (Like all good Southern families, we're full of characters.) It's also an unexpected time capsule, the opportunity for a journey through sensory memory. Running my fingers over the mahogany-stained pages, I can hear my grandfather let out a string of creative invective as his sweet tea sloshes out of the glass and onto the page. The presence of receipts-as-bookmarks, paper scraps, and marketing paraphernalia trapped inside cookbooks only adds to the charms that they possess—for several years, a particularly flimsy cookbook in our kitchen was held together with promotional Martha White packing tape.

Today, yard sales are a prime hunting ground for those of us who enjoy finding these note-covered cookbooks. Reading them, I feel like an eavesdropper on a multigenerational conversation, thumbing through to see what life in the kitchen was like for another family in another time. While I'm usually proud to play interloper, I occasionally blush at the intimacy that radiates from the pages, as if someone has accidentally laid out her diary alongside all the typical rummage-sale knickknacks.

Our family's heirloom Lafayette cookbook now occupies a shelf in my New Orleans kitchen, slightly closer to its Acadiana origins and with an owner now properly schooled on the finer points of boudin and cracklings. My own tentative notes (and appropriately placed grease stains) are slowly taking their place within its pages, as I write the newest chapters of our family's culinary history. 🍲

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*Sarah Baird is a New Orleans-based writer and editor whose book on Kentucky sweets will be published in January 2014.  
PHOTOS, PAGE 8 & 9 by Emilie Dayan.*

# YOU HAVE TO FALL IN LOVE WITH YOUR POT

*As told to Sara Wood by Ida MaMusu*



I GREW UP IN MONROVIA, LIBERIA, in West Africa, under the guidance of my grandmother. She was a chef and an entrepreneur herself, and I learned everything that I know today from her. I came to the United States in 1980 by way of a civil war in Liberia. I moved to Richmond, Virginia, in 1986, and I've been here since.

Liberia was founded in the 1800s by freed slaves. The first president of Liberia was born in Petersburg, Virginia, and the founder of Liberia, Lott Cary, was born in Charles City, Virginia. So the ties with Virginia and Liberia are very close.

My grandmother took me under her wings when I was nine years old and started training me to cook. She made me love it, and she made me care about it, and she made food a part of me and as an art. She used to have these terms: "You have to get to know your pot." "You have to fall in love with your pot."

And so because I was like her, I would be in the kitchen, just dancing. "*You gets to know your pot.*" I'd be teasing her.

My grandmother said the art of cooking is smelling. It's the key. You have to be able to identify all of these different spices by the smell. And then from there, you can go to what it tastes like. But if you can identify peppermint or identify oregano or parsley in the food, you can almost separate those smells when the food sits in front of you. You can say, "Mm, this has too much oregano in it," because it's stronger than all of the other spices in there. And that's one of the things I learned with my grandmother.

The war broke in 1980 in my country, and I was fortunate to get out. I was working at a hotel in New York City, and I had a friend who lived in Richmond. I came to visit her one weekend and just loved it. And one of the reasons why I decided to stay in Richmond: It reminded me of Liberia a lot. There are a lot of places in Richmond that look just like Liberia. For example, we have Broad Street in Monrovia; we have Broad Street here. Liberia is kind of built like the South, and the people were very friendly, just like at home. It just felt so real for me.

In 1996 I opened my first business, which was hair braiding. But my ultimate goal was not to braid hair. I was just doing it to survive. It was the fastest way to make some money. So I just did it.

But my ultimate goal was cooking. I knew that at some point it was going to evolve into that, but I just didn't know how.

I started cooking food out of my house just for customers. They would come to get their hair braided and they would be sitting with me for six, seven hours, and I would offer them something to eat. And they would be like, "Oh what is this?"

And I would explain it to them. "This is spinach and rice and this and that." So I found myself cooking at home for my customers and their families. And then it just started growing. I was doing twenty-five, thirty dinners, because my customers started telling people, "She cooked this stuff. I don't know what it was, but it was so nice."

In 1998, the health department contacted me and said, "Okay, if you want to do this, you need to get a license." I went and bought a few pots, a few little things I needed. I got all my customers to help me do hand-printed flyers, and they started passing it on in their jobs for lunch. And all of the sudden, Chef MaMusu West African Cuisine took off. It was the first West African restaurant in the entire state of Virginia.

It was foreign to the customers. So everybody was excited about this new African restaurant, but I had a challenge. I couldn't really cook traditional African dishes, because I first had to educate them. So I decided to find a middle ground. I said, "Okay I'm going to take Southern dishes and use African spices."

I pray as I cook, and I sing. I just enjoy this. This is really who I am. I believe that if I had to die today, I would come back the same way. There isn't anything else I want to be. I can't even envision myself doing anything else, because I love this art so much. 🍷

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PHOTO, PAGE 11 by Sara Wood.

# SOUTHERN CRAFT CREAMERY

*In Florida, ice cream is a catalyst for change*

*by Ashley Melzer*



FIVE MORNINGS A WEEK, Lauren O'Bryan picks up milk at 4:30 from Cindale Farms, the dairy her family owns and operates in the North Florida town of Marianna. She then drives the milk to her kitchen and starts churning cream.

Lauren's new enterprise, Southern Craft Creamery, makes good use of local produce and regional farms. She works a long day, dreaming up flavors while cooking down blackberries or swirling in batches of Tupelo honey, getting home by 10 in the evening if she's lucky. Fourteen flavors are now in rotation each week. When she's not in the kitchen, Lauren makes delivery runs from Tallahassee to Rosemary Beach and back again.

The way Lauren and her husband Zach, also a North Florida native, figure it, Marianna, in the heart of the Panhandle, has the makings of a local food magnet. Right now, however, the town lacks some of the awareness and enterprise of larger locales.

Lauren and Zach moved back to Marianna to make a difference. It wasn't an easy choice. After living in college towns where local food is exalted, Marianna offered stark contrasts. Farmland is abundant here, but the economy is dominated by Walmart and dollar stores. A new farmers market in the center of town shows promise, but there's little focus on the benefits of buying green, local, or independent.

Southern Craft Creamery is a direct attempt to fill those voids. To accomplish their goals, Lauren and Zach sold their home in Athens, Georgia, where they'd moved after Zach retired from the Marine Corps; gave up on the idea of regular paychecks; and buckled down for a year of product development.

To that end, Lauren completed short ice cream courses at the University of Wisconsin and Penn State. But the industrial production methods taught at those programs weren't the right fit for her mission. Sugar-heavy recipes didn't showcase her parents' milk. Typical grocery-store flavors wouldn't help start the conversations about regional tastes she hoped to have with customers.

"If we can talk to them about our local milk and we can talk to them about the art that goes into making our ice cream," says Lauren, "we also need to talk to them about what else is available here." Lauren hopes a spoonful of ice cream can just as easily start a conversation about cow breeds as one about the farmer with the tastiest blackberries in the area.

# A MIDDLE TENNESSEE MELTING POT

Southern Craft Creamery flavors telegraph the local bounty. Her sweet cream base blossoms with Tupelo honey, harvested down the road in Calhoun County. The strawberries she brightens with balsamic vinegar are harvested at K&S Farms in Live Oak. The citrus that stars in her satsuma ginger sorbet is grown right in Jackson County at Cherokee Farms.

The quality of Lauren's products reflects the values she developed growing up on a farm. "Food has always been the thing that you share with people because it was really all you had to offer and doing it well just meant you cared that much more," she says. "I think that's where I get that gratification that I have when people enjoy the ice cream. It makes me feel like I did something for them." 🍷

*Ashley Melzer, a native of North Florida, is a journalist and filmmaker in Carrboro, NC.*

*PHOTOS, PAGE 14 and BELOW by Lauren O'Bryan.*



*Phita Hach inspires the Skillery Culture Kitchen*

*by Jennifer Justus*

THE SKILLERY CULTURE KITCHEN, a cooking class series taught by immigrants to the Nashville area, took shape in the tiny kitchen of eighty-seven-year-old Phila Hach.

Phila grew up in Nashville and learned to cook with her mother, a home demonstration agent. She later hosted the first televised Southern cooking show back in the 1950s. Prior to her television career, she explored the cuisine of other cultures while working as a flight attendant in the 1930s and '40s. On trips abroad, Phila would invite herself into the kitchens of the Hotel Georges V in Paris and The Savoy in London and ask to cook with the chefs. When I asked her how often they turned her down, she looked at me like I'd asked how often she puts sugar in her cornbread.

That's part of what makes Phila's home in Joelton, Tennessee, the perfect place for a visit with refugees from the embattled Middle Eastern nations of Iraq, Iran, and Kurdistan. Whether running her bed and breakfast or working with women from Nashville's International Center for Empowerment, Phila treats all of her guests with curiosity, openness, and acceptance.

Last summer, Phila invited three refugee women to her home to help explore ideas for a catering business or food truck. As they chopped dill and cucumbers for salads and simmered rice with currants and cardamom, Phila read to them from the cookbook she wrote after hosting a dinner for the United Nations delegation in 1976.

"All people everywhere are dependent on one another."  
 "Everyone needs everyone else for freedom, life, love, and happiness."

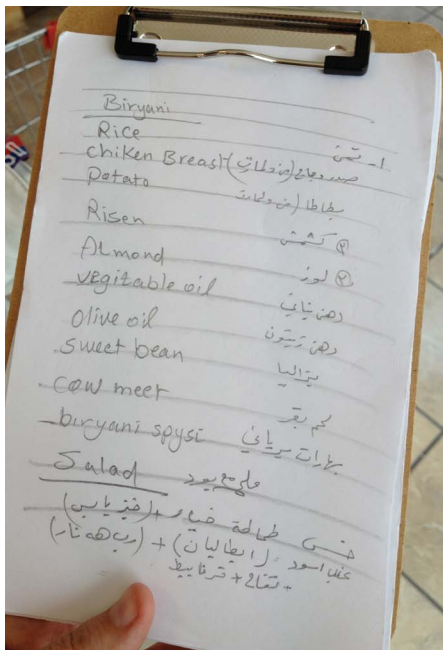
Gity Esfahani, a former member of the Iranian air force, arrived at Phila's home with the words "apron" and "strainer" written in pen on her hand like a to-do list. She wanted to remember the English words as she cooked with Phila, whom she knew to be an accomplished cookbook author. In less than an hour, the words had worn off, and the two women were cooking together as if they had done it for years. While chicken and rice simmered on the stove, Gity whirled fragrant saffron together with sugar in a coffee grinder. Phila, rapt, scribbled notes.

A FEW MONTHS AGO, another one of Phila's mentees, Kurdish immigrant Najat Al Zahawi, taught her first cooking class at the Skillery Culture Kitchen. It was also the inaugural class in the series. Nashville has the largest Kurdish population in the United States, so it made sense to begin the series with a lesson on Kurdish cuisine.

Najat taught biology in Iraqi Kurdistan before moving to the United States in 2007. Here, she works part-time in the nursery of the YMCA. An avid home cook, she demonstrated her biryani for the class—a composed rice dish with chicken, beef, toasted almonds, plump raisins, and a spice blend of cardamom, cinnamon, nutmeg, cumin, mace, clove, and fennel. She dressed a salad with pomegranate molasses and served it with flat bread baked at Sulav International Market in South Nashville.

Class attendees, all American, gathered around the kitchen island. Several of the students had taken classes through the Skillery, which offers instruction in a variety of topics from gardening and sewing to playing piano and home-brewing beer. But most of them were unfamiliar with Kurdish cuisine, and just a couple of attendees had tasted biryani before meeting Najat.

Only after talking about the rice and Najat's own experiences learning to cook did questions go deeper. One of the guests asked Najat about her religion. Najat had questions for her students, too, about marriage, divorce, and whether or not they have children. We talked about *Arab Idol*, the show much like *American Idol* that showcases the singing talent of the Middle East. A popular contestant, Parwas Hussein, comes from Najat's native country, she told us proudly.



As the class came to an end, Najat gestured to the platters of leftover food and explained that in her country, it's important to cook generously for guests. Students gladly went back for seconds and later filled paper plates to their edges with rice to cover and take home.

Regardless of the conversation topic, we connected easily over the plates of biryani, talking about the customs we celebrate differently and the many ways we're the same. 🍷

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*Tennessee-based Jennifer Justus, who writes about food and culture, is the author of the Food Lover's Guide to Nashville. The Skillery Culture Kitchen will host its next class in the fall, exploring the cuisine of Somalia.*

*PHOTO, PAGE 17 by John Partipilo of The Tennessean.*

*PHOTOS, PAGE 18 by Jennifer Justus*

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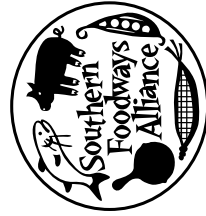
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**THE MISSION** of the Southern Foodways Alliance is to document, study, and celebrate the diverse food cultures of the changing American South.

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