

Gravy

"I'm selling my pork chops, but I'm giving my gravy away." - Memphis Minnie

Gravy Is NEW and IMPROVED!

With this issue, *Gravy* is reborn as an insider's take on the best of Southern foodways. Meet the editorial team:

Editor: Thomas Head, of Washington, D.C., is the executive wine and food editor for *Washingtonian*

(thead@washingtsonian.com).
Associate Editor: Krista Reese, of Atlanta, Georgia, has written for *People*, *Bon Appétit*, and *Southern Living*.

Associate Editor: Jeff Siegel, of Dallas, Texas, has written for *Sports Illustrated*, *Gourmet*, and *Travel & Leisure*.

A Taste of Appalachia: SFA Field Trip to Asheville and Environs

Mark the dates **August 1-3** for our third SFA Field Trip. Our host will be Biltmore Estate in Asheville, North Carolina. Among the highlights will be a tasting of Southern wines and a debate over their place in the pantheon; a shape-note singing with performances by Swannanoa Gathering musicians; an Appalachian Iron Chef dinner featuring local organic produce; and a White Lily biscuit breakfast featuring, among others, John Stehling of Asheville's Early Girl restaurant. Look for a mailing in April and for online registration to be available soon thereafter.

Imported Crawfish: *They Just Don't Taste Good*

by Jeff Siegel

The sigh in Frank Randol's voice speaks volumes.

"What happens," says Randol, a Lafayette, Louisiana, restaurateur and crawfish entrepreneur, "is that people will go the grocery store, and they'll buy crawfish tails and cook them, and they'll taste bad. And then they'll figure that crawfish aren't any good and that Cajun cooking isn't any good."

What isn't good—and anyone who has taste-tested them will attest to this—are the packaged Chinese crawfish tails that are overrunning the American market. This spring, at the height of crawfish season, be wary of the Asian imports. They look the same, are packaged in the same way (usually complete with a Cajun-sounding brand name), and cost anywhere from one-half to one-third the price of the Louisiana product.

That combination has helped them replace Louisiana tails not only across the U.S., but also in the lucrative Scandinavian market. The situation is so dire, in fact, that some observers are wondering whether the almost \$100 million, mostly family-run Louisiana crawfish industry can survive the onslaught.

In the late 1990s, sales of Louisiana tail meat dropped 80 percent over three years, and as many as 60 processors closed. Crawfish must be peeled by hand, so cheap labor allowed the Chinese to export almost 9 million pounds (one-fifth of the entire Louisiana crop, live and processed) to the U.S. Since then, the federal government has accused the Chinese of dumping crawfish at below market prices, and a number of importers have been fined. But the law authorizing the fines is about to expire, and if it isn't renewed, the industry could crash again.

The irony is that the Chinese farm the

same crawfish that's raised in Louisiana, which they got in a trade exchange in the early 1990s. The difference in taste, though, is obvious:

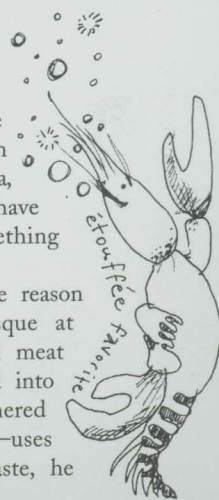
- Louisiana crawfish are parboiled just long enough to separate the meat from the shell. Chinese crawfish are boiled longer, which makes peeling easier, but which also leaves them rubbery and bland.

- Crawfish live in water, and an aficionado will claim that the water that produces the sweetest crawfish is in south Louisiana, on either side of the Atchafalaya River.

- Packaged Louisiana tail meat includes more crawfish fat, a crucial ingredient in flavoring stews, bisques, and étouffées. A traditional crawfish étouffée doesn't use a roux; rather, the tails finish cooking in the fat, which has been augmented by onion, green pepper, and celery.

- Some Louisiana officials are convinced the Chinese add something to the boiling water to rid the crawfish of any impurities. Roy Johnson of the state's agriculture department says testing here hasn't turned up any additives, but notes that the crawfish don't contain normal background bacteria, hence a suspicion they have been boiled in something stronger than water.

Which is just one reason why the crawfish bisque at Randol's—crawfish tail meat ground up and stuffed into the shells, then simmered a roux-based gray—uses Louisiana crawfish. Taste, he says, is all.



This just in: Bill Neal Tribute Dinner to be Staged

On July 17, 2003, there will be a dinner, a tribute to Bill Neal, at the James Beard House in New York. Participating chefs include Bill Smith of Crook's Corner, Chapel Hill, North Carolina; Ben and Karen Barker of Magnolia Grill, Durham, North Carolina; Robert Stehling of Hominy Grill, Charleston, South Carolina; and John Currence of City Grocery, Oxford, Mississippi.

In addition, Moreton Neal will read excerpts from her forthcoming book, *Remembering Bill Neal: Recipes from La Residence, Crook's Corner, and Home*. Reservations will be available through www.jamesbeard.org.

Otha Turner Dies

At press time, SFA learned of a passing of import. Otha Turner, master of the cane fife and king of the barbecued goat, died on February 26 at his home in Gravel Springs, Mississippi. He was, more than likely, ninety-four. Turner, who, along with his family, played the 2002 Southern Foodways Symposium, was a link to a nineteenth-century fife and drum tradition that predated the blues.

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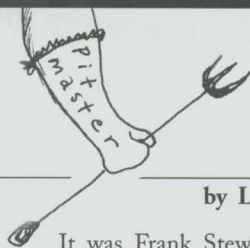
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J. C. Hardaway



1924-2002

by Lolis Eric Elie

It was Frank Stewart's memory that led us to Hawkins Grill that May night in 1993. As a boy, growing up in Memphis, he had eaten barbecue at that small, unheralded place. All those years later, the flavor of the place lingered in his memory.

The sandwiches we would eat that night at Hawkins Grill would be the first of many we would ingest in the course of preparing our book, *Smokestack Lightning: Adventures in the Heart of Barbecue Country*. It was an unfortunate beginning, in a way. J. C. Hardaway, the pitmaster at Hawkins Grill, would come to represent for me and for many the ultimate in barbecue mastery. Little did we know that biting into those sandwiches we would put ourselves on a long and disappointing road. We tasted barbecue all over this vast country of ours. None of it was better than what we ate that night at Hawkins Grill.

J. C.'s was a meticulous method.

Sitting on a hot grill, there was a pork shoulder wrapped in aluminum foil. As Al Green or Albert King or Frankie Beverly played on the jukebox, J. C. cut a few slices and set them to warm on the grill. On the same grill, he toasted the hamburger buns. While the meat cooked, he splashed them with barbecue sauce from an old Palmolive dish detergent bottle. The meat was then placed on a worn chopping board, chopped with a dull cleaver, placed on the toasted bun, topped with a mayonnaise-based coleslaw, cut in half, stuck with a toothpick, and served.

It was a sandwich like that one that led me to write, "In J. C. Hardaway, the shoulder sandwich has discovered its Stradivarius." The sentiment was not mine alone. J. C. was the only chef invited to cook twice at the Southern Foodways Alliance's annual symposium. There is no more exacting audience for American food than that crowd. He wowed them as he did everyone.

You would think that in

Memphis, Tennessee, a barbecue crazed town, that a man like J. C. Hardaway would be a local legend, right up there with B. B. King and Elvis Presley. But truth be told, he worked in relative obscurity, known only by the folks in the neighborhood and the few serious connoisseurs who sought him out near the corner of Bellview and McLemore. The local food critics didn't know him. And even at Hawkins, his genius wasn't appreciated. The owners sold the place and the new owners deluded themselves into thinking they could cook as well as J. C. The business died while J. C. moved around the corner to the Big S Grill, where he completed his career.

Little by little he came to be more widely known. He was mentioned in magazine articles, and in his hometown newspaper. He was honored with the Keeper of the Flame award by the Southern Foodways Alliance, and his fans even had t-shirts and business cards printed up for him. But the end was bittersweet. Years of standing up 12 hours a day, cooking, serving, and cleaning took its toll. His advanced age and failing health made it difficult for him to fully enjoy the accolades that were his in later life.

But when those many midnights turned to mornings and when the small aisle of Hawkins was filled with dancers and there were as many empty quart beer bottles on the bar as there were full ones left in the cooler, what emerged on the plate from J. C. Hardaway's cramped kitchen was as much about nostalgia as it was about food. The taste of his sandwiches invoked the ancestors. And as you ate at Hawkins, the nostalgic details of your own biography in food played in your mind, while you chewed with an intense silence.

So it is fitting now that for the happy few who knew J. C. and his genius, he has become a legend. An ancestor. And years from now, when we are that much further from his era and its culinary ideals, we will still conjure that flavor in our mouth's memory and smile.



The Gift of Southern Cooking

One photograph covers the contrasts: He is big, overwhelming his small chair, wearing the faded jeans and button-down-shirt uniform of every Southern white boy under 40—which he has just turned, despite his dimpled demeanor. She is slender, elegant, African American, her upswept white hair and deep lines proud evidence of a long life. Between them, a table holds fried chicken and pie; lush summer greenery serves as backdrop.

They may be out-of-the-ordinary roommates, but Scott Peacock and Edna Lewis have melded a life together from their work and passion for authentic Southern food—“the real deal, not cutting corners,” as Peacock says. They literally speak with one voice—Peacock’s—in their new cookbook, *The Gift of Southern Cooking* (Knopf), set for publication in April.

Six years in the writing, the book grew from their friendship. Peacock was a 25-year-old rising star working at the Georgia governor’s mansion when they first met. He would go on to turn Horseradish Grill and Watershed (where he still cooks) into Atlanta dining destinations. At 78, Lewis is a legend, first breaking ground in a Manhattan restaurant, Café Nicholson, which informed New York in 1948 that Southern food could be serious. She would later write three cookbooks, including *The Taste of Country Cooking*, and became Grande Dame of Les Dames d’Escoffier in 1999. Together, she and Peacock founded the Society for the Revival and Preservation of Southern Food, which was a precursor to the SFA.

Though the two share a background rich in traditional Southern ties to its agriculture and rural past, they also found they had as many stark differences, as that photo suggests. Lewis, upbringing in Freetown, Virginia, often included blanching and brandied peaches; Peacock’s finery might include canned asparagus and Miracle Whip. His family’s Hartford, Alabama, table, however, included a variety and wealth of field peas, fish, and seafood she considered foreign. She’d come of age in an era that simply didn’t include convenience foods, allowing him to learn her method of “slowly coaxing the essence of flavors from a vegetable or stewing hen,” he writes. Their frequent “cooking retreats” would expend bushels of potatoes and bags of flour in pursuit of the best methods.

The result includes recipes that are as simple as candied bacon and complex as Lewis’s signature Turtle Soup with Dumplings. (The two suggest serving some of the richer soups in demitasse or antique teacups, which they both collect.)

For Peacock, their collaboration began when he met “Ms. Lewis,” as he continues to call her. Despite their differences in age and experience, “she treated me from the very beginning as a colleague,” he says, speaking from the Decatur, Georgia, house they share. “She’s taught me so much about how to lead a life of dignity. I’ve grown so much as a person and a cook by just being around her. It’s like living with a great piece of art. Witnessing greatness makes you a better person.”

—KRISTA REESE



Beyond Gumbo

Jessica B. Harris’s newest book, *Beyond Gumbo: Creole Fusion Food from the Atlantic Rim* (Simon & Schuster, 2003), is a major contribution to the study of New World cooking as well as to its enjoyment. Creole is not, she reminds us, a term that applies only to the cooking of New Orleans—it encompasses the food of the entire southern Atlantic rim, “resulting from the confluence of the Columbian exchange, the Atlantic slave trade, and the European age of exploration, and extending over subsequent migrations of Indians, Chinese, Levantines, and more Europeans.” Creole cooking is “the original fusion food,” “defined by the simplicity and the freshness of its ingredients, and . . . an overarching insistence on taste.”

The foods on both sides of the Atlantic rim are linked not only by common cooking techniques but by certain common themes: composed rice dishes; abundant hot sauces; dumplings and fritters; seasoning and coloring foods; seasoning pastes like *sofrito* and Bajan seasoning; abundant use of okra; use of pig and pig parts; dried, smoked, and pickled ingredients as flavorings; confections using nuts, fruit pastes, and cane sugar; and the preponderance of professional women cooks and their importance.

Having established this intellectual framework, Harris goes on to give us 175 mouth-watering recipes that represent the range of Creole cooking from South Carolina to New Orleans, from the Caribbean islands to the South American mainland. *Beyond Gumbo* is a lovely book, illustrated with vintage postcards, studded with the author’s reflections on her extensive travels. It’s a book that gives equal pleasure to the reader and to the cook, and that’s the high standard to which all cookbooks should aspire.

—THOMAS HEAD

SFA Membership

If you are not yet a member of the SFA, we would be honored to welcome you to the fold. Our mission is to celebrate, teach, preserve, and promote the diverse food cultures of the American South. If you're keen on doing the same, join us by returning the following form. Please note that, though we have included a traditional menu of membership options, we encourage you to pour a little more gravy on. In other words, contributions above and beyond are tax-deductible and much appreciated.

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