GRAVY

ISSUE #50

WINTER READING

A QUARTERLY FROM THE SOUTHERN FOODWAYS ALLIANCE

Southern Foodways Alliance

THE SFA SERVES YOU...

COVER ART: Pass the Damn Ham, Please *(ham on paper), by Brooke Hatfield—an homage to* To Kill a Mockingbird.

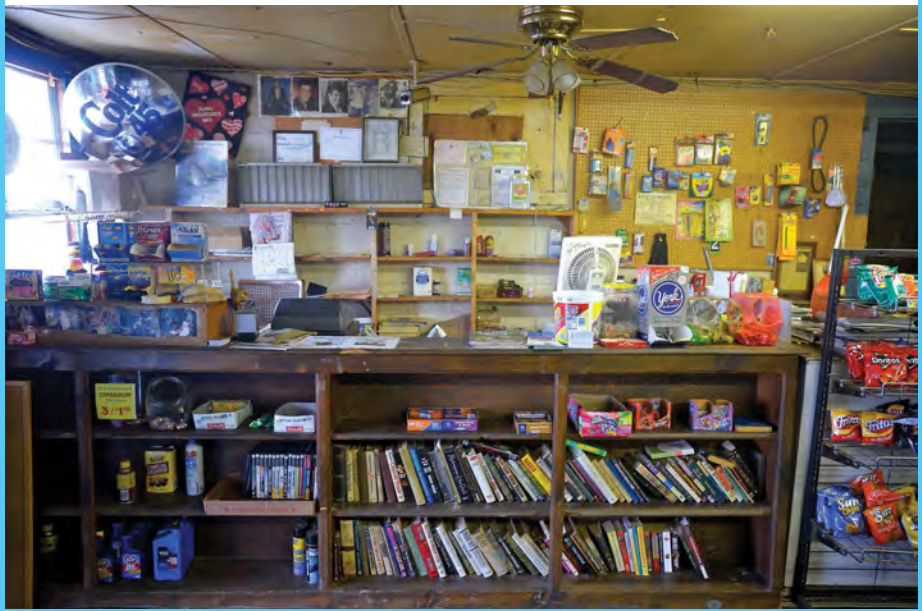
EDITOR'S NOTE

BEGINNING WITH THIS, OUR FIFTIETH ISSUE OF GRAVY, we're doubling in size. What began more than a decade ago as a folded pamphlet is now a forty-page journal, packed with essays, poetry, documentary work, photography, art, recipes, and highlights from SFA symposia. Drawing on our archive of more than 800 oral histories and from our 1,500-plus member base, we aim to vigorously champion the unsung voices of Southern food and drink while asking probing question of our region and its people. With the help of my SFA colleagues and a talented stable of writers, I'll keep improving *Gravy* with every issue.

Enjoy this edition, which we've dedicated to literature and storytelling—my favorite aspects of foodways, not counting the food itself. (This time of year, you can find me with a country ham biscuit in one hand and a piece of Moravian sugar cake in the other.) Herein, you'll find great writing and holiday cheer. We hope it fills you up and makes you think.

– Sara Camp Arnold

PHOTO *by Kate Medley. Lending library, BMW Pit Stop, Moon Lake, MS.*

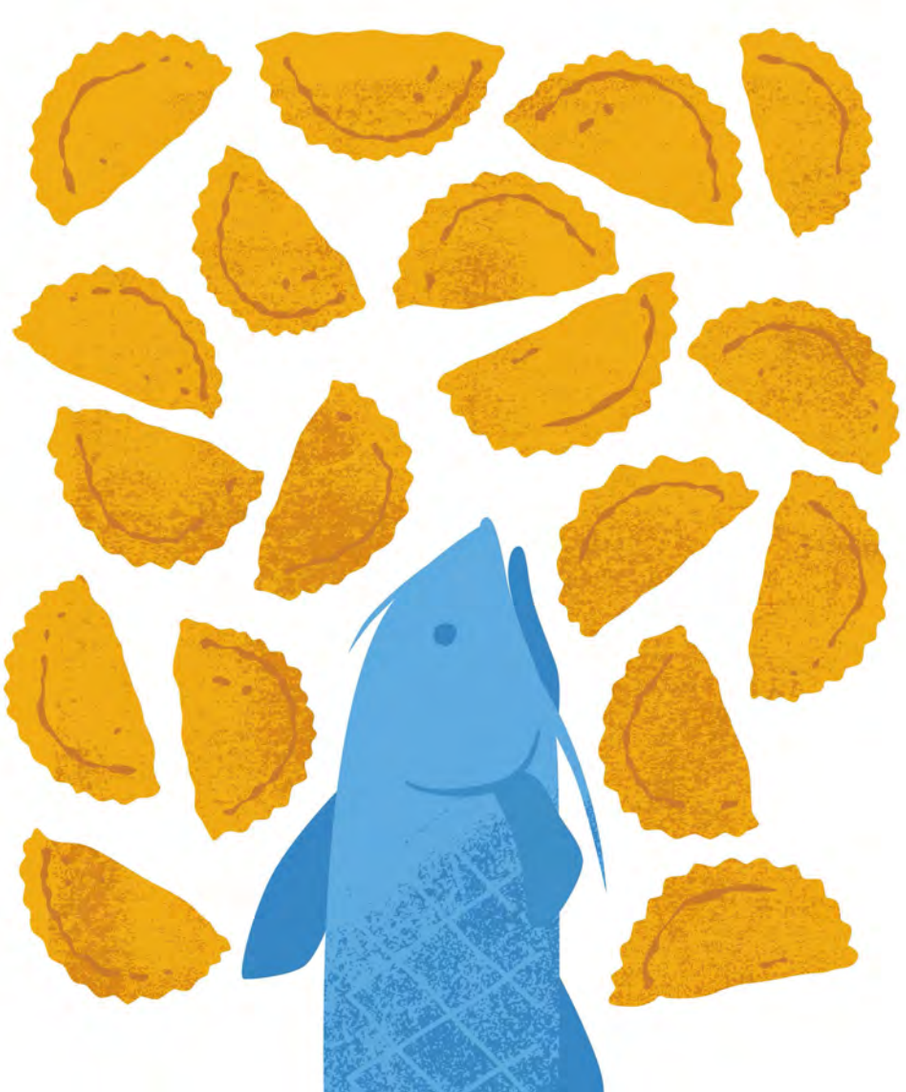


GOOD STORY

ACCOUNTING FOR TASTE

LET ME HAVE MY CATFISH

by Steve Yarbrough



POSTPRANDIAL EPIPHANY: Though my lovely wife is in most ways my better, there is one realm in which I believe I am more tolerant. To wit: When she returns to Poland, she wants to eat pierogi. She loves them all. Ruski pierogi, pierogi stuffed with meat, but especially the ones stuffed with mushrooms. She will order them three times out of four. I understand. First of all, she likes the taste. But more importantly, they remind her of childhood, when the world seemed huge and small pleasures counted for so much. Her grandmother's back from the internment camp where she got sent for being a capitalist. Most of the unexploded shells have been removed from the rubble where she plays. Things are looking up. So I never say, "Oh, but wouldn't you like to try the stuffed duck? Or the Lithuanian-style pork chops?"

Now, when I return to the South, there are only two things I care to eat: fried catfish and barbecue. And both choices trouble her, due to the girth of my waist and her desire that I last a good bit longer. I love the way they taste. But beyond that, when I contemplate fried catfish, I see my grandfather coming up the bank of the Sunflower River, over close to where Mr. Weber's place was, just off 49 North, with a string of catfish. I see a young boy who's never been north of Memphis, east of Tupelo, south of Jackson, or west of Lake Village, and he's licking his lips. It's the early '60s and nothing that's happening around him bothers him much, though when he grows up and recalls it, it will bother him every day. His idea of a big time is to buy a Dr. Pepper at Mr. Tyner's store in Moorhead. His idea of a really big time is to go into Indianola on Saturday night and look at all the toys he can't have at Morgan and Lindsey's. He won't hear of Proust for another fifteen years or read him for twenty. He's never heard of Poland and doesn't know there's a magical little girl over there eating her pierogi.

So I say, "Let me have my catfish, my pulled pork, and hushpuppies, and you eat all the pierogi you want. You can even have those horrid ones stuffed with blueberries. Because while you can take a girl away from Ostroda, and a boy away from Indianola, you can't take either of those places out of either one of them, and why would you want to? Bring your life to your lips and savor it. It could never taste the same to anyone else."

Steve Yarbrough, a native of Indianola, Mississippi, teaches creative writing at Emerson College in Boston and is the author, most recently, of The Realm of Last Chances.

VERSE

WHOLE HOG

IN MEMORIAM JAKE ADAM YORK

by Kevin Young

It is heavy,
a hog, you need
to stay

up all night, nursing
the fire like a beer,
or rise early

like we did, that first time
you taught me how
to drag December

awake into flame,
lighting pecan
& hickory, passed

between cinder block
& ash. Do you dig
a pit? No,

we build one
last house
for the huge sow

who we know
rooted & ranged
the given ground.

Head on, scrubbed, split,
the pig's skin
crackles, a communion

of it—no spit,
just shoveling coals
like a locomotive

engineer, boilerman,
rounder—
Casey Jones

mounted to his cabin
& he took his farewell
trip to the promised land—

the smoke everywhere
like a prayer, clinging
your clothes for days

we do not wish
to wash away. To share
the weight, to wear it—

to honor the creature
by devouring it
whole—we know she

would return
the favor. *He looked*
at his watch

& his watch
was slow. Steam rises sweet
among the maples

& bamboo. How
do you know
it is done? The hog

will tell you.

Christmas Eve Day 2012

Kevin Young is the author of seven books of poetry. His nonfiction book The Grey Album *was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle in criticism and won the PEN Open Award.*
PHOTO *by Denny Culbert.*

Clockwisde, beginning with Puddn'head Wilson: I. Mark Twain 2. William Faulkner 3. Harriet Beecher Stowe 4. Ernest Gaines 5. John Kennedy Toole 6. Katherine Anne Porter 7. James Applewhite 8. Fannie Flagg 9. Margaret Mitchell 10. Harper Lee 11. Timothy Tyson 12. Tennessee Williams 13. Walker Percy 14. Zora Neale Hurston 15. Ralph Ellison. Center: Eudora Welty. Illustration by Emily Wallace

LETTERS

ALL THAT TIMELESS DELICIOUS AFTERNOON

FOOD AND FRIENDSHIP IN THE LETTERS OF EUDORA WELTY AND WILLIAM MAXWELL

by Michael Oates Palmer

What would I have done if you hadn't first made that time out of thin air and that dinner & the talk & and the music out of your heads, like a story (because everything had been packed up, I could see it) and I hadn't had that evening at your house? It was so lovely. It came & afterwards vanished like the soufflé we had, & was just as real, though, and so pleasurable & getting better every minute, like all good visits snatched from the jaws of time…

Eudora Welty, letter to William and Emily Maxwell, June 10, 1970

SHE LIVED ALMOST HER ENTIRE LIFE IN JACKSON, MISSISSIPPI. He left his home state of Illinois as soon as he could, splitting his time between New York City and its suburbs.

Through five novels, three works of nonfiction, a children's book, and—perhaps most importantly—dozens of short stories, Eudora Welty cemented her status as the South's most prominent author since William Faulkner.

As fiction editor of *The New Yorker* for over forty years, William Maxwell played confidant and counsel to a pantheon that included J.D. Salinger and John Updike. His writing career produced six acclaimed novels, two works of nonfiction, and several volumes of short stories.

Theirs was a journey spanning more than half the twentieth century, one in which their relationship grew from that of writer and editor, to good friends, to, by the time they were both near ninety, surrogate siblings.

Separated by over a thousand miles, the intimate friendship of Eudora Welty and William Maxwell would have been impossible were it not for a correspondence that invited each other not just into their literary work, but into their day-to-day lives.

In letters that often included Emmy, his wife of over fifty years, Maxwell and Welty wrote about literature and writing.[1] They wrote about their shared interest in gardening, about his young daughters, about her beloved mother. And they wrote about food.

BORN A YEAR APART, their first contact came in their early thirties, when Welty wrote Maxwell at *The New Yorker*. Her first submissions were rejected, but their correspondence soon led to a friendship. As fiction editor, Maxwell championed Welty at the magazine, finally getting her published there in 1951.

Food first came up in the working dialogue between editor and writer. "For seasons, there is a little early June peach—though mostly they ripen in July, and so do the good watermelons," explained Welty in 1953, apparently to answer a fact-checking question. "Would green tomato mincemeat be what we called pickelilly in Illinois, or is it really a form of mincemeat?" asked Maxwell in 1957.

Soon, though, food became a lexicon of friendship. Both Welty and Maxwell vividly described meals they wished to share, and relived those they did share. Welty recalled a New York picnic with the Maxwells in a 1966 letter: "Are you having beautiful warm days and cool nights as we are? I don't know when I've ever seen it so fine, for so long, here—every day it holds. It's like the picnic day when I came out to Yorktown Heights and we climbed up above the brook and Emmy brought out melon and prosciutto and artichokes and all sorts of al fresco joys and when finally we were able to move on we found a golf ball—I was astonished to see we'd been right on the brink of another civilization, all that timeless delicious afternoon."

In 1973, while on vacation in Cape Cod, Maxwell wrote that "the Wellfleet woods are full of mushrooms and Emmy left her mushroom books at home, so we come back from walks with our hands full of

[1] What There Is to Say We Have Said: The Correspondence of Eudora Welty and William Maxwell, *was edited by Welty scholar Suzanne Marrs and published by Houghton Mifflin in 2011.*

mushrooms of all shapes, sizes, and colors, and then Emmy reads about them but so far no eating of em. But last night we had steamed clams and sea-bass, and E said why do people get so excited about lobster. It was marvelous, the bass, cooked in white wine and spices, in an iron fishpan."

Welty and the Maxwells sent food as gifts over the decades, too. In 1953, Maxwell wrote to Welty about hosting his boss, *New Yorker* editor William Shawn, for dinner. The Maxwells served a gift from Welty: "They all came to dinner, and we had eggs en gelee and a baked ham and spinach and your watermelon pickle and Bavarian cream pumpkin pie (ask Emmy for recipe) and they all wanted to know who made the watermelon pickle."

That Christmas, the Maxwells savored another gift from their friend in Jackson: "We are both enchanted with the pecans from Mississippi, which bear the same relation to pecans in stores that oranges direct from Florida do. Emmy has certain recipes that she has been longing to put into practice clearly marked out in her mind, and I slip in and undermine them by a nibble each day.... We all...were gratified to have you suddenly rise from the pile of gifts under our tree on Christmas morning."

In 1955, Welty thanked the Maxwells for a fruitcake: "Sitting out in the backyard—afternoon, a white half-moon—and your fruit cake inside me—me, not the moon, though that speaks for where it could aim at, in its excellence.... As you see, I opened it like a letter. It came like a letter, & besides it had a center of gravity, that means something to eat.... Really it is the nicest and lightest I ever tasted.... Our next recipe-swapping on Bill's typewriter, maybe I can copy it down?"

These are not just thank-you notes, but writers at work, using their tools to describe their appreciation for the gifts—and for each other. A 1957 gift tray from the Maxwells, wrote Welty, was "like an Impressionist still life... but with permission to eat it, which made it different from a Matisse."

AS A PUBLISHED GENRE, literary correspondences are sometimes less casual than they first appear. Authors write not just for each other, but for posterity. Welty and Maxwell's letters crackle with the genuine enthusiasm of two friends eager to share, eager to connect, eager to compensate for living so far apart.

Consciously or not, these writers practiced their craft through descriptions of meals, picnics, wines, desserts. The eye for detail and the sharing of memory are hallmarks of their respective work. Memory played a central role in Welty's Pulitzer-winning *The Optimist's Daughter*, with its prodigal sibling returning to the South to care for and then bury her ailing father. And Maxwell's *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, winner of the National Book Award, blended memoir and fiction to relive a long-ago murder in Maxwell's hometown of Lincoln. (In a letter to Welty after a Thanksgiving trip back to Illinois, Maxwell wrote, "The gossip was much worse than I remembered, the air simply marvelous. I don't think I thought about the air very much when I was growing up. And of course, I hadn't experienced champagne, which is what it was most like.")

By sending food to enjoy and recipes to make, in telling of their meals without each other, or in remembering fondly the meals they shared, Maxwell and Welty fostered an intimate friendship despite busy lives and the distance from Jackson to Manhattan.

"Well it's wonderful to be alive. Wonderful to be a writer.... Wonderful to care. Isn't it?" wrote Maxwell to Welty in 1954.

In a letter written a year later, remembering a meal with the Maxwells, Welty captured how a shared love for food and a passion for expressing that love in writing were key to sustaining their friendship: "That day was so perfect, and as they say about the right roses, it has keeping powers—I held it coming down in the train, and have still got it.... I wonder how we got so many delicious things into one day—I think because time stretched out—I for one never thought of train time or felt the slightest responsibility for it—not while we had...roses, strawberries, Colette, conversation, beet greens—but I won't let a list even appear to be forming over the surface of that pleasure—so think of my thanks like a little spring."

Michael Oates Palmer's writing credits for television include The West Wing, Army Wives, Rubicon, *and the forthcoming* Crossbones. *He serves on the board of directors of the Writers Guild of America West.*
ART, PAGE 8 *by Hayley Gaberlavage.*

VERSE

Heirloom

by Sandra Beasley

My father will never enjoy
the heavy, sunrise sweetness
of a golden tomato dashed with oil,
layered in basil. As with spinach,
as with olives, he tastes only
the claustrophobia
of salt his Texan mother
unleashed from a can
a half-century ago, feeding
four children on a budget.
We talk little of this:
the foods our parents
cook to mush, pepper to ash,
flavors forever rendered to chore;
that this too was a form of love.
What I remember is how,
during a snowstorm that stranded
our schoolbus, I hiked
to my grandmother's instead.
And she made me not
chicken soup from scratch,
or a braise of bacon and cabbage,
but rather a tray of tater-tots
straight from freezer to oven.
They goldened like July.
We ate them with our fingers
while we played Scrabble, waiting
until it was safe to take me home.

The Lifting

by Sandra Beasley

In England, an unwelcome guest
was served mutton's cheap, tough cut.

If he lingered the next morning,
he was given the shoulder again, cold.

An ocean away, men of North Carolina
stoked hickory fires. Why wouldn't

they reach for a swell called the *picnic*?
Who doesn't drool for an animal

so savory-strange that it carries its butt
on its arm? Let us raise the shield

of appetite, let us bleed hot vinegar,
let us separate the meat with our fingers.

All a hog asks is total immersion. We
are the ones who shame it as *wallowing*.

O Possum

Clarksdale, Mississippi

by Sandra Beasley

Joy of Cooking begins *If possible, trap 'possum*—
a first step to eating any creature—
then suggests *feed it on milk and cereals for 10 days*
before killing. Sometimes you sweeten a thing
from inside out. Like when

the son-in-law of the bluesman steps
to the juke mic just as a skinny tail whips up—
grasping the chair pulled to a silent piano behind him—
and the audience gasps, *rat,*
but it's the piggy face of an opossum

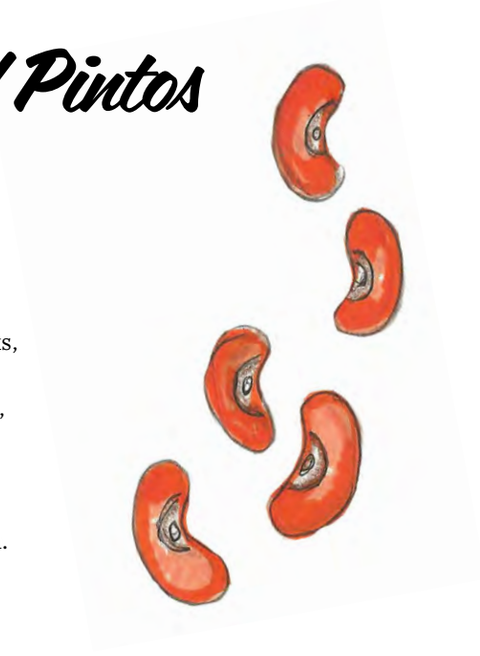
behind the oblivious bluesman-in-law, inspecting us
before twisting paws to the keys as if a solo is nigh.
O possum, whose blood is immune to rabies
and snake venom; O possum, madonna
who carries a babe for two months after birth.

If only we could trust her grin of 50 teeth.
When the bluesman gets up to give a *go-'long* shuffle,
the man bedding his daughter sees this—
not the inspiring beast, only the choreography—
and plays harder, plays faster. *Parboil, page 134.*

Roast as pork, page 421. Serve with: Turnip greens.
This is Red's on a Sunday night,
and one of these men is destined for my lap,
while that hussy flees into the den of amplifiers
without making a single sound.

In Praise of Pintos

Phaseolus vulgaris



by Sandra Beasley

Forgive them, these mottled punks,
children burst
from the piñata of the New World,
and their ridiculous names—
Burke and Sierra,
Maverick. Forgive
how they fill the hot tub with ham.
Forgive their climbing instinct.
Forgive their ignorance
of grandparents who
ennobled Rome's greatest:
Fabius, Lentulus, Pisa, Cicero
the chickpea. From the Latin, *puls*—
to beat to mash, to throb.
Forgive that thirst. Forgive
that gallop. They are the promise
of outlasting the winter.
They are a wink in the palm of God.

Prohibition Toast

by Sandra Beasley

You charge a buck to see the blind tiger;
I'll pay a quarter to see the blind pig.

Here's to the laws shimmied up and over—
Here's to the hosts who match swig for swig—

Gin at the door is served complimentary;
Two more, we'll be complimenting the gin.

Give me an address where no cops can find us.
Call me a rover, and pour us again.

Sandra Beasley is the author of three collections of poetry and a memoir; she was the 2010 Summer Poet in Residence at the University of Mississippi and is the recipient of a 2014 DCCAH Artist Fellowship.
ART, PAGES 12–14, *16, by Kelly Lasserre.*
ART, PAGE 15, *by Blair Hobbs.*

FAMILY

CHRISTMAS IN AUBURN

MY ANNUAL STEP INTO THE WORLD OF HAPPY GROWNUPS

by Blair Hobbs

MY BROTHER MIT TELLS ME that in August of 1963, when Dr. McLarty called Mama to tell her she was pregnant, she dropped the rotary phone receiver and cried so hard into her apron skirt that my other siblings assumed that she had heard news of cancer. I can't say that I blame her. My brothers and sister were well on their way to being grown, and Mama had gotten back to her own life by taking up smoking and pursuing a master of fine arts degree at the University of Mississippi. "Well, piffle," I can hear her say, "boiling milk bottles and ironing diapers is my future, *again*."

Eventually, Mama's despair turned into determination. She finished her degree when I was a toddler and her older children were settled into school routines. In 1967, when I was three, she and Daddy moved to Auburn, Alabama, where Daddy became dean of Arts and Sciences, and Mama was hired as an art professor. Throughout my childhood, Mama and Daddy both worked, and my common interaction with them was at mealtimes and Sunday church. For the rest of my childhood, they pretty much went their own way and, with a hired maid, I went mine.

By 1970, my parents had established a reputation for hosting an academic Christmas party to which even Jewish and Hindu faculty members looked forward. The party was a gift, a way for Daddy to thank his colleagues for a year of good work. Mama enjoyed hosting her art colleagues, who added a dash of weird to the earnest historians and political scientists. And I relished my annual step into the world of happy grownups.

The guest list was always repeated unless there was a new hire in Daddy's department or someone in the art department wasn't granted tenure and therefore quit believing in Christmas. Daddy was accustomed to the quirks of academics, so his people had to pull some pretty horrible behavior to get cut from the party list.

One Thanksgiving, a Russian professor who received a less-than-stellar academic review attempted revenge upon Daddy by unloading a pillowcased king snake into our curbside mailbox. We watched from the kitchen window as the disobedient snake flailed out of the mailbox's mouth and terrified the man—who believed the snake was poisonous—into leaps worthy of a Bolshoi ballerina. Daddy turned to my mother and instructed, "Marley, please cross Dr. Petrovsky off the list."

During party prep time, Mama, Daddy, and I worked together. We'd set up a fat Douglas fir from the Glendean drugstore parking lot and wrap it with colored light strands and ornaments. Daddy hung the bundled plastic mistletoe in the foyer, and mama draped the split-level stairwell with a garland of fake boxwood and fruits. I placed electric candles in the windows of our split-level ranch.

When the big day arrived, Mama, Daddy, and I were a melange of tinseled anticipation. The doorbell rang, Mama greeted guests, and I ferried coats and pocketbooks to my bedroom. Mrs. Campbell's mink always smelled of cigarettes and Windsong perfume, and Mrs. Cooper, a dead-ringer for Edith Head, carried a brass cricket box instead of a real clutch. Every year, as Dr. Mohan slid Mrs. Mohan's wool coat off of her shoulders, I feared that her peacock sari would catch a button and unspool from her sugarplum frame.

After the guests settled, it was my job to check on Daddy, who stood at the breakfast room table and ladled bourbon punch from his grandfather's porcelain foot-washing bowl. When the cheer diminished, I knew it was time to pour in a gallon of ginger ale, a can of pineapple juice, a pitcher of orange juice from concentrate, and a gallon of Old Grand-dad. Then I opened the freezer and grabbed an ice ring, wreathed in sliced lemons and oranges, and slid it into the murky concoction with barely a splash.

Navigating the living room to get to the food table was daunting. Men in red vests or cranberry leisure suits stood shoulder-to-shoulder, and while they downed punch, I waded beneath their elbows. The women, in crushed velvet miniskirts or silk bell-bottoms, lifted their chins to exhale smoke from their frosted smiles. Many times these happy folks paused their grown-up conversations to speak to me.

"Blair, you're such a little lady!" Dr. Littleton would say.

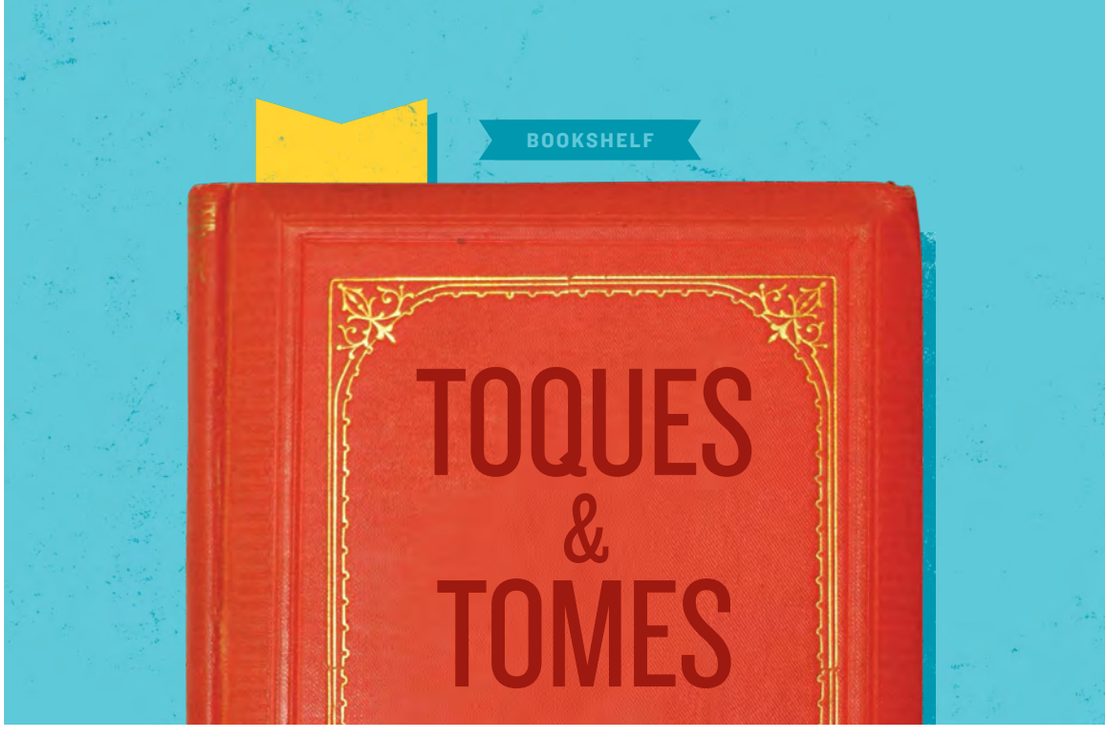
"Blair, you look so pretty in your mother's pearls!" Mrs. White would declare.

And, upon noticing that the plastic boxwood garland was close to melting on the fireplace mantle, I'd excuse myself to open the casement windows and sliding glass door to let in the cool December air.

The dining-room table was a glory to behold. Polished silver candelabras held slender red candles lit with fingernail flames. In the table's center were shallow bowls of Pink Perfection camellias clipped from the backyard bushes. At the head of the table was an enormous silver tray overlapped with pickled mushrooms and sliced beef. Silver chafing dishes, mounted on scrolled parenthetical legs, held hot crab, artichoke, and spinach dips. Across the table, there were pewter baskets of Wheat Thins and Triscuits, homemade sugar cookies in the shapes of wreaths and Christmas trees, buttery cheese straws, and Bisquick-inspired hot sausage balls. At the far end of the table, a crystal bowl filled with pink shrimp and hulahoops of onion slices cast a chandelier prism.

After our guests left and the Perry Como record, set to repeat, finally became audible, Mama, Daddy, and I hunted down clean plates and cocktail napkins so that we could enjoy the remains of the feast. Mama kicked off her pumps and poured a glass of white wine from the brown Lancer's bottle. I found the untouched cookie platter and rung my fingers with the sugary wreaths, nibbling them down to my knuckles. As the cigarette smoke cleared, Daddy, with a toothpicked shrimp in his hand, would salute my rosy-cheeked mother and me and declare, "Another great party, ladies."

Blair Hobbs is a poet and artist who teaches creative writing at the University of Mississippi. Her work has appeared in The Oxford American *and is forthcoming in* Garden & Gun.



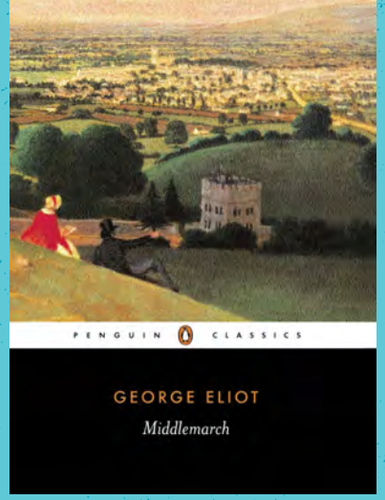
The South's chefs, bartenders, and artisans read more than just cookbooks. We asked a handful of friends to tell us about their favorite works of literature.

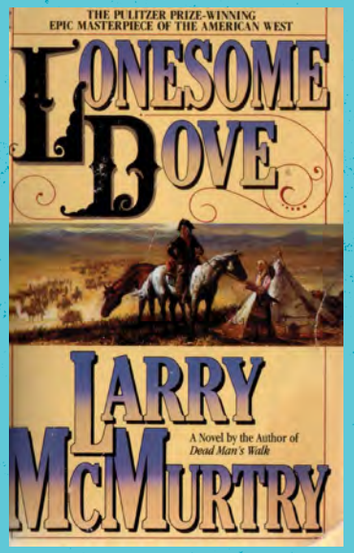
Hugh Acheson, chef-owner, 5&10, Athens, GA: *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, by Mordecai Richler, speaks to my Canadian roots.

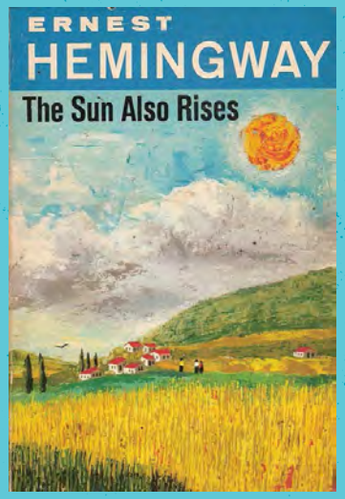
John Currence, chef-owner, City Grocery, Oxford, MS: *Joe*, by Larry Brown, is a favorite of mine. It's as if Cormac McCarthy and Ernest Hemingway had a big, bad baby.

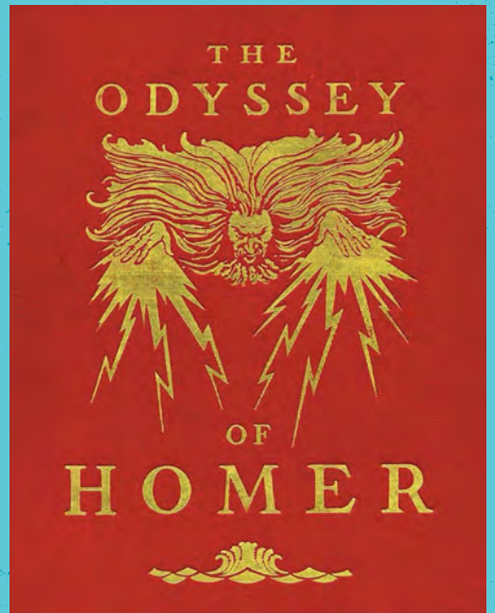
Nathalie Dupree, cookbook author, Charleston, SC: My favorite novel is *The Passionate Epicure*, by Marcel Rouff. It echoes my own philosophy and is written with humor and wisdom.

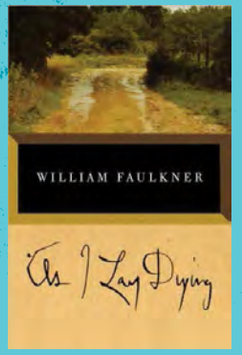
Diane Flynt, maker-owner, Foggy Ridge Cider, Dugspur, VA: My current favorite is *More Scenes from the Rural Life*, by Verlyn Klinkenborg. This wise author offers up beautiful words about the dailiness of rural living—the repetition and keen attention to detail that bring a note of grace to every farmer's day.











Chris Hannah, bartender, Arnaud's French 75, New Orleans, LA: My favorite novel is *All the King's Men*, by Robert Penn Warren. Aside from my attraction to its depiction of the lore of New Orleans and Louisiana, Warren's writing style has had such a profound effect on my own writing practices—I've even changed the way I write e-mails.

Phoebe Lawless, chef-owner, Scratch Bakery, Durham, NC: I have read *Lonesome Dove* at least half a dozen times by now. I continue to be transfixed by Larry McMurtry's sprawling landscapes and rich, hilarious, sad, compulsive characters. I even love the ridiculous mini-series!

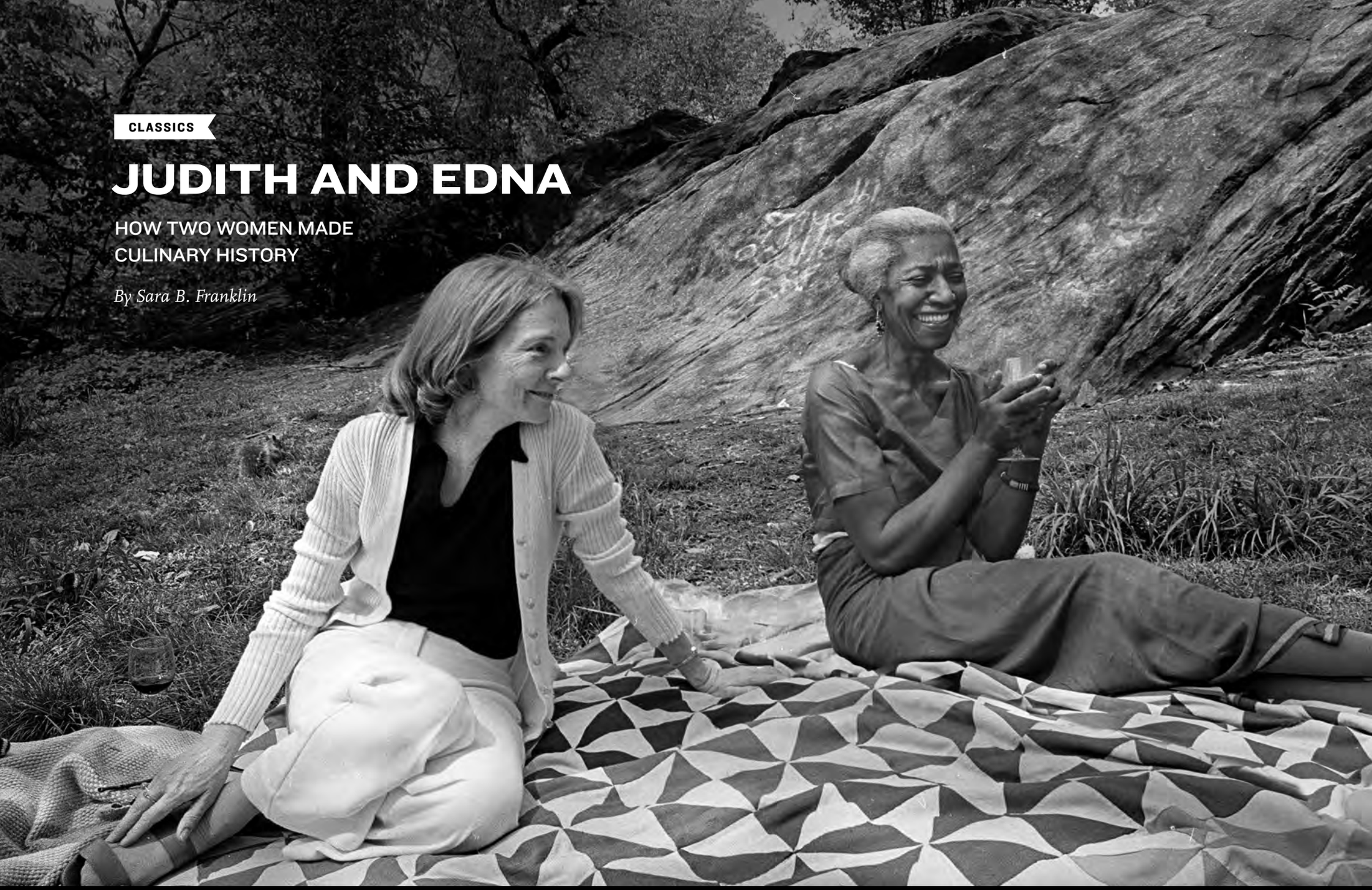
Edward Lee, chef-owner, 610 Magnolia, Louisville, KY: My favorite novel from my favorite writer is William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*. It's a novel you read more than once because the first go-around, it creeps into your brain and blows up everything you ever thought you knew about how to tell a story. Once you gather yourself up again, you have no choice but to go back and marvel at the architecture of his words.

Matthew McClure, chef, The Hive at the 21C, Bentonville, AR: *Shogun*, by James Clavell, is an awesome read. The way Clavell develops the characters through two different viewpoints, Eastern and Western, sets the tone for cultures colliding.

Rodney Scott, pitmaster-owner, Scott's Bar-B-Q, Hemingway, SC: I still love the Ray Bradbury short story "All Summer in a Day," which I first read in sixth grade. It's a good reminder to appreciate each moment.

Bill Smith, chef, Crook's Corner, Chapel Hill, NC: My favorite novel is *Middlemarch*, by George Eliot (aka Mary Anne Evans). It's the story of people with lively minds who learn the deliciousness of using them—or don't.

Frank Stitt, chef-owner, Highlands Bar & Grill, Birmingham, AL: On my list of all time favorite novels are *The Brothers Karamazov*, *Moby Dick*, *Lonesome Dove*, *The Odyssey*, *The Alexandria Quartet*, *The Sun Also Rises*, and *The Fellowship of the Ring*. These are books that capture your soul, take you on an incredible journey, and share insights about struggle and striving.



CLASSICS

JUDITH AND EDNA

HOW TWO WOMEN MADE CULINARY HISTORY

By Sara B. Franklin

TODAY, "LOCAL" IS SUCH A CULINARY BUZZWORD that it's almost passé. Good chefs interpret the places from which they hail, and nowhere has this revival of place been stronger than in the American South. In a cultural moment like this, we forget it wasn't long ago that much of America was ignorant, if not downright ashamed, of its regional cuisines.

Judith Jones, a longtime editor at Knopf in New York City, who retired last year at age eighty-eight, helped introduce American palates to international cuisines and elevate domestic regional foodways. Her interest in regional cookery was piqued by Edna Lewis, the Virginia-born chef and writer.

Jones was still a wet-behind-the-ears junior editor at Knopf when she shepherded Julia Child's *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* through publication in 1961. At the time, postwar prosperity brought boxed cake mixes and frozen vegetables to supermarkets, promising quick and easy paths to domestic bliss. Child and Jones weren't fooled. Really good food, they knew, demanded an attentive and skillful cook, one who wasn't afraid of having a bit of fun.

Over the next decade, Jones edited writers who helped usher international techniques and ingredients into American home kitchens. Marcella Hazan gave us brilliant minestrone. Irene Kuo taught us to listen for the sound of a properly heated wok. Claudia Roden introduced us to Middle Eastern mezze. And Madhur Jaffrey taught us to prepare an honest curry.

IN ADDITION TO HER CULINARY WORK, Judith Jones was an accomplished and prolific editor of fiction. She edited the likes of John Updike and Anne Tyler, two explorers of the nooks and crannies of American cultural landscapes. Her interest in workaday lives, and in the factors shaping American culture in the second half of the twentieth century, eventually drove Jones toward American food.

On a trip to Georgia in the early 1970s with her journalist husband, Evan Jones (who was researching his 1975 book, *American Food: The Gastronomic Story*), Jones noted a lack of "good Southern cooking" in Atlanta. To get their fix, the couple sought out rural boarding houses where they ate fluffy biscuits and fried chicken. American regional cooking, Judith Jones recognized, was fast disappearing. Jones thought she could do for American food what she had done for French. She believed she could get recipes and stories on the page and encourage home cooks to keep the pots of tradition simmering. She began that quest by collaborating with Edna Lewis.

Jones narrates her life as a string of lucky breaks. Her story about meeting Lewis is no different. A native of Freetown, Virginia, Lewis had earned a cult following while cooking a mix of Southern and French cuisine at Café Nicholson on New York's East Side. Lewis wanted to write a cookbook, and an agent had set her up with a collaborator. After a few months of false starts, the chef and her writer were sent to meet with Jones, who was known by then for her skill at coaxing prose out of novice authors. Jones remembered, "It was when she started to talk. All I did was ask some questions! You knew how much she knew when she started telling the story about her mother, who used eggshells to put seeds in so they could go into the ground on the first warm day."

Soon stories of Lewis's upbringing burbled up. Jones dismissed the collaborator, and she and Lewis began to meet regularly in the Knopf offices. While Lewis talked, Jones scribbled notes. At the end of their first session, Jones knew they had struck gold. "Write it just as you remember saying it," she told Lewis. And so it went. For months, the two tugged at the threads of memory and wove them into what we now know as Lewis's signature voice—certain, evocative, and no-nonsense.

Knopf published *The Taste of Country Cooking* in 1976. It was filled with recipes and stories specific to Lewis's home, from biscuits and busy day cake to menus for hog-killing and Emancipation Day. All focused on the ingredients and traditions of place. And not just any place, but the American South, the region so long dismissed by the food cognoscenti. Lewis gave voice to African American communities while highlighting the beauty that illuminated the long shadow of slavery.

As it happened so many times in Jones's career, relationships that began in the office turned personal. Jones chose her authors carefully, and most became dinner-party guests, visitors to her country home in Vermont, and mentors, both in and outside of the kitchen.

In the early 1980s, Jones was wrapping up a book on hunting and fishing with Angus Cameron, a fellow Knopf editor. "Edna knew that I was working with Angus, so she had some ideas," Jones recalled. "She said, 'I wish I could get you squirrel. Because we used to get them right in Central Park.'" Her brother George Lewis still hunted them in

the Virginia woods. Laughing, Jones recalls, "So she got her brother to send these little dead squirrels by Fed-Ex. I mean, they'd been shot the day before. So I skinned and prepared them, and I made squirrel stew. And it was just delicious!"

Jones's memory of Lewis is reverential. "I was so genuinely taken with her that it must have reached her," she recalled. "Edna taught me a lot about what I care about, human nature." Jones remembers Lewis as among the gentlest and humblest people she ever knew—sure, but never showy.

After publishing Lewis's first book with Knopf, Jones signed more authors to tell the culinary story of America. She published books about New England cooks and the Northern Heartland. But the South had caught Jones's eye. For her visionary but underappreciated Knopf Cooks American series, Jones commissioned *Barbecued Ribs and Other Great Feeds* (1987) and *The Florida Cookbook: From Gulf Coast Gumbo to Key Lime Pie* (1993) from writer and editor Jeanne Voltz, a native of Florida. *Preserving Today* (1992) was written by Jeanne Lesem, who grew up in Depression-era Arkansas eating her mother's pickles and preserves. Perhaps most famously, she published *Biscuits, Spoonbread & Sweet Potato Pie* (1990) by Southern food evangelist Bill Neal, the chef-owner of Crook's Corner in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

Jones's late career embraced the world outside American borders. More each year, she explored international cuisines to better understand what was happening here at home. As Americans learned more about the world through travel, and as more immigrants came ashore, we recognized the distinctiveness of our own culinary cultures.

Jones's work with Edna Lewis and other Southerners helped lay the foundation for today's resurgence of regional food. Think Sean Brock and Vivian Howard, both of whom are now at work on their own place-based books. Over a fifty-year career, Jones helped us narrate and make sense of our young nation's complex history. Her ideal was not a melting pot, but a patchwork quilt that honored what each region brought to the great American table.

Sara B. Franklin, a doctoral student in the food studies program at NYU, is working on an oral history project about food, publishing, and memory with Judith Jones.

PHOTO, PAGE 24, *by John T. Hill.* ©

VERSE

Mise en Place

By Melissa Dickson

It's a routine mole removal, but he charts
the dark sweep of skin inside his patient's forearm,
an oven burn long since healed to this calligraphy.
He sees them every day, four or five inches beyond the palm,
proof that when the timer chimes its impatient trill
these women grab dishrags instead of oven mitts

It's written here as clear as the cookbooks
she's long since stopped consulting: the toddler lurching
into the scent of an unleashed oven, the slick
of applesauce to mop up, the rice and butter beans
simmering stovetop, the little thing it is to scar
an arm, and the sin it is to burn the cornbread.

Melissa Dickson is a poet and mother of four whose poems can be found in Shenandoah, Cumberland River Review, *and* Southern Humanities Review.

ART *by Blair Hobbs.*

RECIPE

THE FIRST FIRE

SERVE WITH A GOOD BOOK

by Jayce McConnell

I'M A FIRM BELIEVER that one's demeanor, diet, and duds should match the current season. I also hold that an outfit isn't complete without a cocktail in hand. As I break out my sweaters and scarves I'm reminded of a drink that made my fall very warm and rich. It's one I stir after the first cold snap, as autumn winks at winter.

THE FIRST FIRE COCKTAIL

2 oz. Laird's applejack

1 oz. Carpano Antica Formula vermouth

¼ oz. Nocello walnut liqueur

5 dashes Angostura bitters

Combine ingredients in mixing glass, stir with ice, strain into snifter. Garnish with orange peel.

One such chilly evening I stood before my home bar desiring something to warm, calm, brighten, and inspire my night. My beloved roommates were passionate tipplers, so our counter was always well-stocked.

I combined Laird's applejack with some Carpano Antica vermouth, threw in a heavy hand of bitters, and stirred. I noticed a bottle of Nocello walnut liquer and added a bit to my glass, twisted some orange peel over the top, and sipped.

It matched the air, the mood of the season. I made several more that night and spent hours re-reading H.P. Lovecraft, each sip enhancing the nostalgia. The warmth it gave me reminded me of the first fire my father built in our fireplace every year, and of the bonfires my friends and I constructed on camping trips in the chilly Lowcountry autumn. I hope it brings you as much comfort. Cheers.

Jayce McConnell is the head bartender at Snackbar in Oxford, Mississippi.
PHOTO *by Emilie Hill.*

ORAL HISTORY

SHE SPOKE, AND I LISTENED

As told to Sara Wood by Haylene Green

In 2013 Sara Wood joined the SFA as an oral historian. Based in Wilmington, North Carolina, she is completing an MFA in creative nonfiction at UNC-Wilmington. We asked Sara for her take on the relationship between oral history and literature.

THE EVENING I MET HAYLENE GREEN, an urban farmer in Atlanta, Georgia, rain mercilessly poured on midtown Atlanta—and on me. I squeaked across the lobby of Ms. Green's apartment building and followed her to a small room in the basement. There, she opened a thick photo album with pages of fruits and vegetables from her West End community garden. And she stared talking. I put the recording equipment together as fast as I've ever assembled it. My job was simple: She spoke, and I listened. All of her answers were stories.

Speaking of his book *The Storied South* on a radio program, folklorist Bill Ferris recently said something that stopped me in

my kitchen: "When you ask a Southerner to answer a question, they will tell a story. And embedded in that story is the information that they feel is the answer to the question."

Oral history, like the most satisfying literature, relies on listening and observation. The way people speak, how they tell stories, where they choose to pause and scratch their nose, to me, is the greatest part of listening. Being an oral historian or a writer requires you to listen as though your life depends on it. What seems like a simple act is actually the heart of the work. To that end, I share an excerpt from my interview with a farmer who also happens to be a storyteller.

HAYLENE GREEN'S STORY

GARDEN QUEEN. I was given that name by people who found out about my garden. I have a tropical garden in the West End of Atlanta. It's not acres. I would say a good half-acre, maybe a little more.

I was born in Port Antonio, on the island of Jamaica. My mom is Cuban and my father is Jamaican, a Maroon. The Maroons were a group of people brought over from Africa like all the other slaves who were brought over, but they never became slaves because they would not have it. They did not listen to slave masters and so they were thrown off the boat and left to die or survive. And survive they did.

They went up in the hills and on the water coasts and they fished, and they farmed, and they hunted. They're entrepreneurs. They don't care if it's just bananas or mangoes or some other fruit, they just believe in growing and reaping their crops and selling them and eating from the land and being independent. They like to be free to do what they want to do, when they want to do it, at whatever time they want to do it. And I sure do have the DNA very strong, because that's what I am.

My father and grandfather, they would get up way before the family got up and bring back provisions that my mom would prepare for our breakfast before we went to school. Don't know how they did it, because it's dark. I think they just farmed by the moon and the sun and the stars. We didn't know we were rich, but we ended up being richer than we thought, healthy-wise.

There are so many mango trees in Jamaica. They just grow. It's just a thing. You walk along the side of the road and you're going to and

from school, and you just pick a mango—or just go in someone's yard and ask them, could you pick up a mango? Because they're all over the ground. Oh, we got mangoes. We got mangoes. We have avocados. We have coconuts. We have bananas.

I am what you would call a fifth-generation farmer. If I do not farm, I'll get sick. If I have to rent, borrow, beg a piece of property somewhere, I have got to put something on the land because I can't live otherwise.

AS A CHILD, I CAME TO NEW YORK. I used to plant in pots. Whatever could grow in pots, I would plant it. I came to Atlanta for a family reunion, for a first visit to the South. We were fortunate to see a lot of trees. So I said, "Oh my goodness, we need to move here, because look at all these fruit trees." We all packed up and moved down to Atlanta in 1975. I watched these trees grow green, then brown, and then all different kind of colors—and I'm waiting for the fruits. Unfortunately, they were not fruit trees. They were just trees.

So I said, "My goodness, I did not know you could have so many trees without them bearing a fruit or a nut or something," because in

Jamaica just about every tree that we grow is edible in some way or the other, whether it's the leaf, the fruit, the nut, whatever—they're edible.

I said to myself, "Well I'm going to change that." And so I set out to try to plant trees that are edible. And I'm in the process. I am growing bananas just like I would in Jamaica. I'm growing apples. I'm growing peach. I'm growing plum. I'm growing every berry that you could think of. I'm growing herbs and spices and eucalyptus and flowers and tropical pumpkin vines. I'm just growing.

Everything is grown in natural soil. I do have problems with worms sometimes, but when all else fails, if I have to have some worm holes in some of my vegetables, let it be. All they did was eat some before I got to it, so, you know, I have to eat the rest.

I grow a lot of supplies that other farmers don't grow. One big one is the tropical pumpkin. They have so many different names for my big tropical pumpkin. You see, I wear it over my shoulder. I call it my baby. It weighs fifty, sixty pounds. "What on earth is this she has? Is that a big gourd? Is that a watermelon?" I am known for my famous tropical pumpkin soup, and I sell it at the farmers' market and I am always sold out. People love it. It is made up with the pumpkins and potatoes and carrots and not little tiny pieces—it's filling. When you have a bowl of tropical pumpkin soup with all the goodies that I put in there, it's a meal.

There are not many black farmers in Atlanta at the moment, especially where we're farming in the West End, because there's not a lot of farmland. It's not huge. We would more or less call it a garden. There are more black farmers, and female, out in the rural areas. But I found out that one of the reasons that you don't find as many black females farming is because they grew up thinking farming is not a pleasant thing. But it's coming back around again.

I have five children, and I spent more money on bread than on doctor bills for the past forty-seven years. My mom is eighty-six and she runs rings around me. My aim right now is to teach others for the future to eat nutritious, healthy food, and sustain themselves. That's what I'm doing here in Atlanta, so that's my plan: to teach the neighborhood how to survive.

PHOTOS, PAGE 32 & 35, *by Lizzy Johnston.*

DIRECTOR'S CUT

A LOWCOUNTRY PEDIGREE

REMEMBERING MY MOTHER IN CHARLESTON

by John T. Edge

MY MOTHER, MARY BEVERLY EVANS EDGE, was born in Bowman, South Carolina, an hour west of Charleston on the edge of the Lowcountry. Her father, Jesse Clifton Evans, ran a narrow-gauge railway that connected Bowman to nearby Branchville. After a fire on the train wiped out a neighbor's cotton crop, my grandfather moved the family fifteen miles to Orangeburg, where he ran a filling station and repaired lawn mowers.

No matter where she lived, my mother longed to belong to Charleston. A lifetime student of the city's rainbow-row architectural styles, my mother collected seagrass baskets once used to winnow rice on local plantations and souvenir spoons embossed with palmetto-framed horse and carriage scenes. When talking, she swallowed her vowels to mark her birthplace, cultivating a Lowcountry gentry accent even after moving to Georgia, where she met my father, and where I was born and raised.

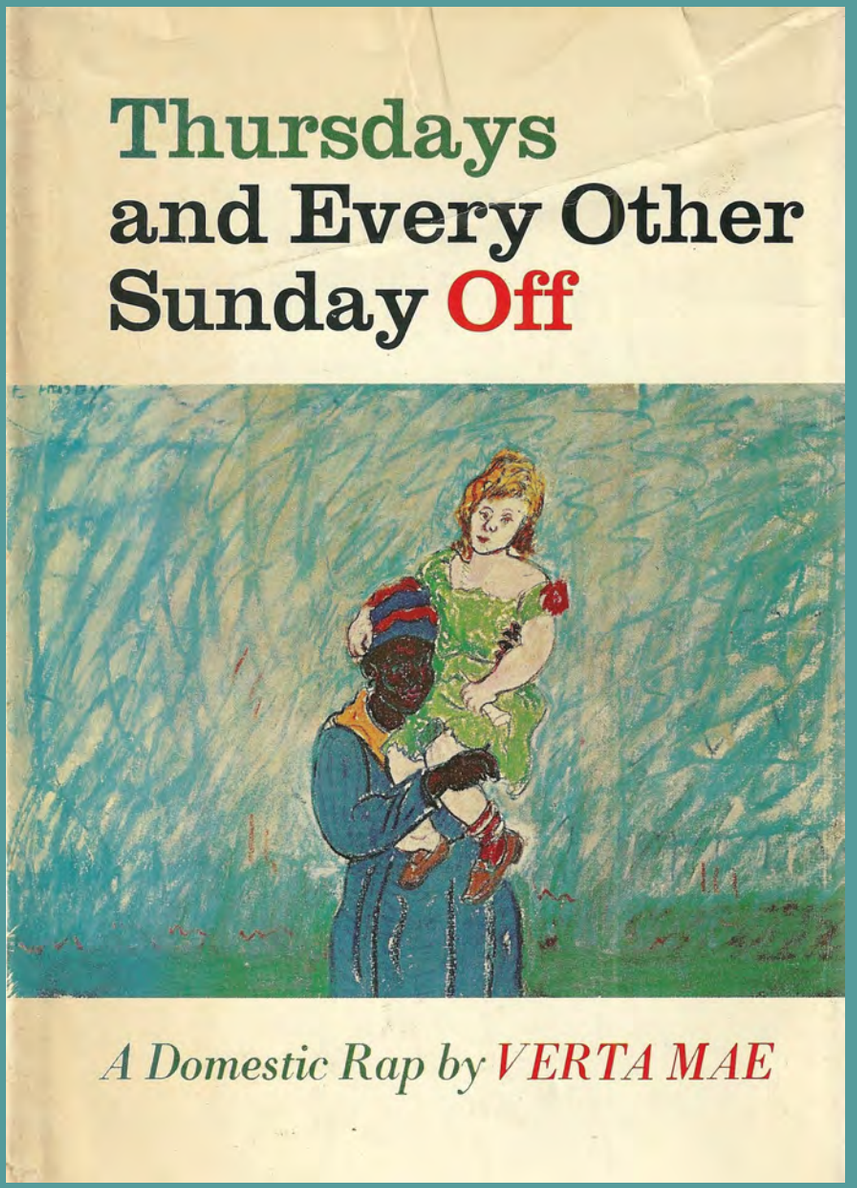
In 1970, when I was seven, our family of three traveled to Charleston for the city's tricentennial celebration. My mother hoped to get a glimpse of the Earl and Countess of Malmesbury, said to be in the city to offer salutations and congratulations from the Queen Mother. Because my mother said that's what proper young gentlemen wore when dining, she dressed me each evening in knickers and a blue blazer with a City of Charleston crest on the breast pocket. And each evening, when a waiter appeared tableside, my mother ordered she-crab soup to begin, for she believed that dish was the height of sophistication.

My mother passed more than a decade ago. I now return to Charleston often. Though I've ditched the knickers, I still wear a blazer when I dine. When I take a seat at a damask-draped table and unfold a starched linen napkin, I think of my mother's aspirations and appetites. For a moment, it's 1970. My mother is in her element. The Earl and Countess are on their way. And a demitasse of she-crab soup, laced with orange roe and Lowcountry pedigree, awaits.

John T. Edge directs the Southern Foodways Alliance.

WINTER READING

A RARE COPY *of* Thursdays and Every Other Sunday Off, *by SFA Craig Claiborne Lifetime Achievement Award winner Vertamae Grosvenor, is worth the hunt. Don't ask John T. Edge to lend you his copy (pictured here); you'll have to find your own.*



ABOUT GRAVY

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DOCUMENT

STUDY

CELEBRATE

THE MISSION of the Southern Foodways Alliance is to document, study, and celebrate the diverse food cultures of the changing American South. We set a common table where black and white, rich and poor—all who gather—may consider our history and our future in a spirit of reconciliation.

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LOOK FOR ISSUE #51 OF GRAVY IN SPRING 2014

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