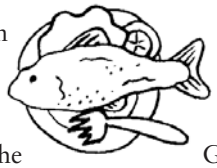
Gravy

"I had to go abroad to appreciate the mystery of food and its rituals in my native Southland. . . . I saw it first in the lives of people whose languages, customs, and culture were foreign . . . ."

— Bill Neal, *Bill Neal's Southern Cooking*

NUMBER 16, FALL 2004 **NEWS FROM THE SOUTHERN FOODWAYS ALLIANCE**

Taste of the South: January 6-9 at the Inn at Blackberry Farm Benefits SFA!



Savor the best the culinary world has to offer when seven chefs converge at Blackberry Farm in Walland, Tennessee for a Taste of the South event, benefiting the Southern Foodways Alliance.

Packed with incredible food and wine happenings, the weekend promises to stimulate the palate and relax the mind. Guests can pick up culinary tips and techniques at Blackberry's Cooking School while enjoying all the merriments of the weekend, or just savor the gala dinner on Saturday night.

Taste the bounty of the South from chefs Michelle Bernstien of Azul, Miami, FL; John Currence of City Grocery, Oxford MS; John Fleer of the Inn at Blackberry Farm; Jim Gerhardt of Limestone, Louisville, KY; Chris Hastings of Hot and Hot Fish Club, Birmingham, AL; Michael Laiskonis of Le Bernadin, New York, NY; and Ken Vedrinski of Sienna, Charleston, SC.

And we haven't forgotten the wine. Sam Beall of the Inn at Blackberry Farm has gathered some of California's most talented winemakers. In keeping with our theme, all have Southern roots — including Knoxville native Eric Grisbey and Mary Fran Rocca of Rocca Family Vineyards in Napa, Memphis natives Dr. Michael Dragonstky and Dr. David Sloas from Cornerstone Cellars in Napa, and Virginians Jeffery Fink and Bill Cates of Tantara in Santa Barbara.

VIP Package guests will enjoy all events including the "Jack Daniel's Chef's Night Out" dinner, cooking demonstration, lunch at the Maple Cottage, and preferred seating during the Auction and Gala Dinner. Sponsors of this event include Lexus, the preferred vehicle of Blackberry Farm, and Jack Daniel's Tennessee Whiskey. To register, please call (800) 557-8864. To learn more about the Blackberry Farm, log on to www.blackberryfarm.com.

Cornbread Nation 2: The United States of Barbecue

Edited by Lolis Eric Elie
Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004; *$17.95 paperback*.

Although there are other foods that cover the geographic expanse of the United States, none exemplify the themes of unity and diversity in the way that barbecue does. Whether it's beef or pork, chopped or pulled, served with or without sauce, barbecue stands unrivaled in its great regional variation.

Cornbread Nation 2: The United States of Barbecue, edited by Lolis Eric Elie, is the second volume in a series on the best of Southern food writing collected by the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is the first book to take a serious look at barbecue from a myriad of viewpoints, and it is the most complete barbecue anthology ever assembled. Even the most devoted barbecue fans will find many new and surprising insights in this collection of 43 newspaper columns, magazine pieces, poems, and essays. Included are such diverse topics as the history of pigs in America, the Caribbean origins of barbecue, the role of black chefs in the history of Texas barbecue pits, and the best time of the month to make South Carolina barbecue hash.

In "Cheer Up Mama," Peter Kaminsky writes about his pilgrimage to Mitchell's Barbecue in Wilson, North Carolina, and reveals how the old-school, woodsmoke barbecue tradition was passed from one generation of pit masters to the next. Ripley Golovin Hathaway's "In Xanadu Did Barbecue" chronicles the 150-year evolution of today's national enthusiasm for barbecue—including the introduction of such familiar backyard mainstays as the charcoal briquette, the Japanese hibachi, and the Weber grill. In "We Didn't Know from Fatback," Marcie Cohen Ferris offers her perspective on the challenge of respecting Jewish dietary laws in Memphis—a city in which, historically, barbecue is synonymous with pork. And in "When Pigs Fly West," Elie demonstrates that great barbecue knows no geographic boundaries in his celebration of two great barbecue restaurants in San Francisco's Bay Area:

continued on next page ▸

'Cornbread Nation 2' continued from page 1

Memphis Minnie's and KC's Bar-B-Q.

In addition to pieces on barbecue's place in the pantheon of American food, *Cornbread Nation 2* also includes a host of selections on other Southern culinary traditions and foodways. Pat Conroy explores the natural pairing of funerals and food in "Love, Death, and Macaroni." Calvin Trillin documents his yearning for Louisiana boudin in "Missing Links." Molly O'Neill charts the rise of the Mississippi-made Viking range to trophy stove status in "The Viking Invasion." And John Martin Taylor ponders the widespread (if less-than-universal) appeal of boiled peanuts in the South.

Elie notes that, "like cornbread, barbecue is a food that unifies the vast expanse of the American South, an ever larger portion of the American mainstream," and offers *Cornbread Nation 2* as "a State of the Culinary Union. A Snapshot. A reporting on how it is now." Featuring contributions from many leading lights—as well as emerging voices—of Southern foodways, *Cornbread Nation 2: The United States of Barbecue* is a book to be read, studied, and, most of all, savored.

* * *

Lolis Eric Elie is a longtime columnist and food writer for the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* and author of *Smokestack Lightning: Adventures in the Heart of Barbecue Country*. A founding member of the Southern Foodways Alliance, Elie discovered many barbecue variations while traveling as road manager with the Wynton Marsalis Band from 1991 to 1993.

GRAVY

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Remembering Bill Neal: Favorite Recipes from a Life in Cooking

BOOK REVIEW

By Moreton Neal
Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004; *$22.95*.

Like many Southerners, Bill Neal had to leave the South to appreciate it. He writes in his best known book, *Bill Neal's Southern Cooking*, "I had to go abroad to appreciate the mystery of food and its rituals in my native southland. . . . I saw it first in the lives of people whose languages, customs, and culture were foreign, but whose values were mine, before I saw the richness in my family's, my region's life." But as Moreton Neal points out in the introduction to this new collection, his cooking at Crooks Corner and La Résidence in Chapel Hill reflected a Mediterranean aesthetic. With the assistance of the owners of these restaurants, Moreton Neal has rescued the recipes that she and Bill Neal used during these years, dishes that were "a fusion of local produce and traditional technique." In order to make this what she calls a "best of Bill" collection, the book also includes recipes for hoppin' John, shrimp and grits, chocolate chess pie, and other Bill Neal classics from his three Southern books. It's a tribute to a talented cook who was among the seminal figures in the current renaissance of Southern cooking.

—Thomas Head

East Texas Yamboree

By Jeff Siegel

Ask Mary Beth Johnson the secret to making sweet potato pie, and a sly note creeps into her voice. "Well. ..." says the 61-year-old Texan who chaired the sweet potato pie competition at the 67th East Texas Yamboree, held Oct. 20-23 in Gilmer, a little more than midway between Dallas and Shreveport. "Well, it really depends on the sweet potato. Given the rules of the contest, there isn't much you can do with the recipe. So you want to find the best potato you can."

Which is the point of the Yamboree, started in 1935 and held annually since, save for a couple of years during World War II. Sweet potatoes had long been an important cash crop in Upshur County, so it seemed natural to start a sweet potato festival to coincide with the 1936 Texas Centennial. This year, organizers welcomed more than 100,000 people for a variety of sweet potato-related events, including the crowning of Queen Yam and a sweet potato decorating contest, in which the goal was to make the item look like almost anything else. One year, the winner stuck a stick in the potato and then made the vegetable look like a possum hanging onto the stick by its tail.

Johnson's specialty—in fact, her family's specialty—is the pie contest. Her sister, Sally Lowe, has won the grand prize; Johnson has never done quite that well. What makes the pie competition so demanding is that the recipe allows for little more than sweet potatoes, eggs, milk, butter, sugar, vanilla, salt, and a homemade crust. Cinnamon and allspice are allowed, but frowned upon. And don't even think of using coconuts or raisins. "What you want to do is to be able to taste the potato," says Johnson. "You want to taste its natural sweetness."

Given those restrictions, though, there is a fair amount of creativity among the contestants. Milk or cream or evaporated milk? How smooth should the filling be, given how stringy sweet potatoes are? And what kind of sweet potato should you use?

Johnson says most contestants use the Beauregard, which is grown throughout the area. The key, though, is to get your potato from a farmer, fresh from the fields, and not from a grocery store, where it could well be months old. Johnson buys a box from local growers, which gives her quality as well as enough potatoes to work with.

Spinning Spider Creamery

By Fred Sauceman

Her name may be French and her pedigree Swiss, but Simone Owen's products are purely Southern Appalachian. She lopes wildly up and down the mountainsides in Western North Carolina and tries to eat metal siding. She's curious about everything in her path and sizes up most inanimate objects as potential meals.

Simone is a goat, a frisky yearling Alpine, to be exact. And making mischief isn't her only role in life. She and the nearly 30 other females in Jeff and Chris Owen's herd happily offer up the raw ingredient, milk, for what eventually becomes artisanal farmstead goat cheese, sold at farmers' markets and tailgate stands throughout the western part of North Carolina.

"Our elevation is high, our air and water are pure, and our goats reflect this in their vitality and production," says Chris Owen, who grew up in cheese-rich Wisconsin. She and Jeff home-school all three of their sons, and each has a role in making this hillside creamery work. Cullen, at 15, supervises his younger brothers, Sylas, 11, and Morgan, 6, as they ring the cowbell and yell "Hey goats" at 7:00 a.m. and 7:00 p.m. milking times, seven days a week.

Spinning Spider Creamery is a licensed microdairy, authorized to produce milk and make cheese. Fluid milk is not sold to the public. Instead, it becomes the basis for fresh chevre, a French-style goat cheese, pure white and not "goaty" at all. It's dense but spreadable, slices easily, and holds its shape well when heated for a warm goat cheese salad.

"I tell people not to be afraid of the word 'goat' in front of cheese because some have pretty negative images of what goat cheese is going to taste like," says Chris. "It's very fresh and light, with a tangy kind of flavor. The texture is similar to a light cream cheese."

Chris saves some of each batch to season with cracked peppercorns, garlic and dill, and herbs de Provence. Her summer garden cheese is flavored with herbs, onion, and sun-dried tomato. Spinning Spider also ages some of its goat cheese, sells a five-month-old gouda, and marinates its own feta in olive oil and herbs.

It all started when Chris and Jeff discovered their children were allergic to cow's milk. They unsuccessfully tried soy and rice milk before acquiring their first dairy goat. "From that point on, it became obvious this was a lifestyle we were going to embrace," says Jeff. "It became more than just feeding the family."

The Owens' first goat, Bluebelle, was given to Cullen as part of a 4-H dairy chain project. When she had her first doe kid, it was given to another 4-H-er, who then continued the chain. Ruby considers herself the grande dame of the herd, over the objections of Marnie, Charlotte, Iris, Celine, and the other girls. Young goats like Kipling, who'll eventually be a herd sire, are bottle-fed to reduce the risk of disease.

In the spring of 2004, the Owens installed a machine that milks eight goats at a time. The hand-milking, Chris says, was "doing a real number on our arms and hands. The milking machine is a step toward our future and maintaining our sanity."

Despite the unrelenting demands on his time, son Cullen says working in the creamery has opened up a whole new career opportunity.

"I hope maybe someday to go to France and have an internship at a French dairy, where I can learn some of the more complicated cheeses."

Cullen is in charge of feeding the herd of multicolored Alpines and white Saanens, making sure his brothers have done all their chores, and keeping the milking parlor clean and up to code.

The Owens occupy a 1970 A-frame house where the pavement runs out on East Fork Road, in the Grapevine community of Madison County, North Carolina, between Bailey Mountain and Bear Wallow. Because of their location, coupled with the fact that it's hard to walk away from the cheese vat and take care of customers, most all cheese sales are transacted in nearby Mars Hill and in Asheville.

"Taking care of animals is something you can't put aside," says Jeff. "It affects how we take vacations and is a total commitment for us."

A New Jersey native, Jeff works with the Avery County extension office as a Christmas tree specialist. He and Chris met at forestry school in North Carolina.

"I grew up surrounded by dairies," says Chris. "But we raised horses. I remember getting ready for horse shows at 4:00 in the morning, looking at all the dairy lights that were on around us and thinking, 'I will never do that.' And yet here we are."

Spinning Spider Creamery, Marshall, NC; 828-689-5508, cowen@madison.main.nc.us

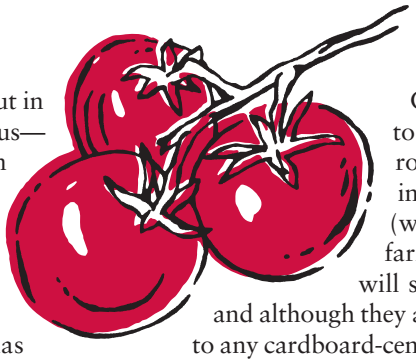
Spinning Spider Warm Goat Cheese Salad

6-ounce roll of goat cheese, herbed or plain
1 egg
2 tablespoons water
One-half cup bread crumbs, seasoned or plain
Dash of cayenne pepper
Vegetable spray
4 cups mixed salad greens

Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Lightly spray a baking sheet with vegetable spray. Cut cheese into thin pieces. Whisk together egg and water. Mix crumbs with cayenne pepper. Dip cheese slices into the egg mixture and then into the crumb mixture, coating evenly. Place on the baking sheet and bake 8-10 minutes. Turn and bake another 4-5 minutes or until cheese is browned. Divide salad greens onto four plates. Top with the warm cheese. A red wine vinaigrette works well as a dressing. Serve immediately.

Grainger County Tomato Festival

By Krista Reese



In Grainger County, Tennessee, the locals turn out in full force to celebrate their best—and most famous—crop: tomatoes. Each year, this remote mountain community in the northeast corner of the state throws a festival on the last full weekend in July (this year, July 23-25; in 2005, July 29-31). In 2004, the event drew about 22,000, as many people as live in the entire county.

The superior taste of the Grainger tomato has never been adequately explained, even by the University of Tennessee scientists who have studied it. Most natives, like Frances Clark, believe, "It has something to do with the soil." Local farmers switch varieties—sometimes using the green-shouldered Celebrity or Empire, occasionally Big Boy or Better Boy—but always manage to turn out a thin-skinned, ruby fruit berry of a tomato, suitable for dusting with salt and leaning over the sink to enjoy.

Mountain farmers, sometimes a quirky and cantankerous group, don't share their secrets, often closely following the cryptic planting signs of the *Old Farmers Almanac*. Their independence has thus far prevented any sort of alliance that would allow Grainger tomatoes to grow to Vidalia onion status. And although the tomato's fame has spread, many farmers, like Steve Longmire, won't ship beyond a 300-mile radius, because tender Graingers won't survive the trip. "We're not really interested in getting bigger," says wife Kelly Longmire. "We just want to get better."

Grainger farmers have tomato growing down to a science, producing tomatoes nearly year-round. The season ends with first frost, usually in November. In December, says Kermit Clark (who will be next year's festival chairman), farmers begin seeding. In January, small plants will show. By March, the first crop will be in—and although they are hothouse varieties, they're vastly superior to any cardboard-centered supermarket 'mater you'll find. By July, the glorious red fruits, along with heirloom and specialty varieties like yellow-and-red Mr. Stripey and purple-centered pulps, are trumpeted in every tiny IGA with hand-lettered signs: GRAINGER CO. TOMATOES.

This year's festival included a concession booth, an auto show, arts and crafts exhibits, book signings, a Civil War encampment, a beauty pageant, tomato wars (like paintball, except with tomatoes), and, of course, an Elvis impersonator.

Kermit Clark, who manned the concession booth, says the group sold between "18 and 19 bushels of green tomatoes, one slice at a time." The combo meal of five slices of fried green tomatoes, a 12-ounce bowl of pintos, a slice of onion, a wedge of cornbread, and a soft drink rang up at $4. "Our religion wouldn't let us charge any more," says Kermit. "It just wouldn't be right."

For information, call 865-828-3433, or go to www.graingercountytomatofestival.com

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