SFA

GRAVY

WINTER 2019 • NO. 74

THE NEXT BATCH OF GRAVY WILL BE READY IN FEBRUARY

SFA GRAVY

Subscribe via your preferred podcast player, or listen online at southernfoodways.org/gravy

SFA GRAVY

ISSUE NO. 74 • WINTER 2019

FEATURES

26
THE HIDDEN COSTS OF FOOD FESTIVALS
Hanna Raskin

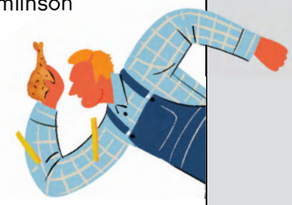
35
WE THE PEOPLE ARE LARGER THAN WE USED TO BE
Tommy Tomlinson

42
THE STATE OF CAMPUS FOOD

When Food Service Means Food Stamps
Amy Yurkanin

Prices of Meal Plans Soar at Mississippi Universities
Aallyah Wright and Luke Ramseth

At Auburn, 20 Percent of Campus Food Must be Local
Melissa Brown



2 Editor's Note
Cynthia Greenlee

4 Featured Contributors

6 Director's Cut
John T. Edge

8 Good Ol' Chico
Gustavo Arellano

12 Rooted in Place
Rosalind Bentley

22 Wait and See
Jenna Mason

56 One More for the Road
André Gallant

62 How to Make Tamales in Prison
Jason Hernandez

68 Rathead Riley: The Great Gatherer
Rob Long

76 The Spirit and the Food Feeds Them
Holly Lynton

84 Last Course
Brittany Conerly

Illustrations by Delphine Lee

ON THE COVER: Illustration by Delphine Lee

COOKING FOR HIS LIFE

Jason Hernandez thought he'd be in prison for the rest of his days. Cooking became his outlet—and his business.

BY CYNTHIA GREENLEE

Cooper Neill

Jason Hernandez prepares the filling for the Doritos tamales he learned to make while he was incarcerated.

FOR THIS ISSUE OF *GRAVY*—MY first as deputy editor—I talked to Texan Jason Hernandez, a powerful voice for criminal justice reform. You may have seen him in *The New York Times* and other publications. After being sentenced to hundreds of years in prison—outrageously harsh punishment—for first-time drug offenses as a 21-year-old, he was released after almost two decades behind bars. He now works with incarcerated people, their families, and allies to teach them how to petition for commutation in a system profoundly weighted against them. I'm proud to know him.

And I know him as an advocate and a cook. He became a contraband cook behind bars in federal prison, in exceedingly difficult circumstances: no stove, no easy access to ingredients, and a lack of autonomy. He takes us through the complicated supply chain, the makeshift cooking methods, and the Doritos tamales that were his signature item. We'll share the recipe with the online version of this story.

Jason talked with me about the food he cooked and the relationships he built while locked up: with the older Mexican man who showed him the ropes of cooking while incarcerated, the customers who ordered tamales for the Super Bowl, and the compadres for whom he cooked special meals before they went home after doing time. He was constantly trying to answer this question while locked up: How do you find comfort in an institution whose very aim is to punish and dehumanize you? He found solace, purpose, and a livelihood in providing meals and snacks for the other men on his cellblock.

He found solace and purpose in providing meals and snacks for the other men on his cellblock.

Jason's story is just the kind of deep, accessible narrative I like to read, commission, and publish. It takes us inside a bigger social issue via the lens of an individual story. It shows us that many things can be true at once. Jason tells only a fraction of his story here. He explicitly chose not to dwell on the many harsh realities and losses he experienced and witnessed while locked up. But you see glimpses of the carceral system's quotidian violence in his references to constant surveillance, segregation, and lack of food choice. You also see the beauty he searched out and cultivated in a space where alienation reigns.

I hope reading Jason's own words will help you see formerly and currently incarcerated people as just that—people. I hope this piece will help you recognize that being able to eat well, to cook for yourself, and to determine what you consume are human rights. Or maybe you will just marvel at the ingenuity it took to run a well-oiled prison catering operation in a climate of perpetual contingency and risk that's like and unlike a restaurant "on the outside."

Here's one of my takeaways: I now can't buy a tasteless winter tomato at the grocery store without thinking about how precious this same vegetable would be in prison (and wondering how many got smushed in someone's compression socks during smuggling!). If one of the articles in this issue hits you in the gut, sticks in your craw, or comes to mind while you're browsing your favorite grocery store's produce section, I'll consider this issue a job well done.

ROSALIND BENTLEY

Rosalind Bentley is an enterprise reporter for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. A native of the Florida Panhandle, she grew up spending weekends on her family's farm, where she learned rural foodways from her many great-aunts. Her stories have appeared in *The New York Times, Essence, Longform*, and other publications. Her work has been anthologized in *Best American Newspaper Narratives*. She was a Pulitzer Prize finalist for race coverage during her time at the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*. Bentley is a 2017 SFA Smith Symposium Fellow and will guest-edit the 2020 spring issue of *Gravy*. Thanks to her years in the Minnesota tundra, she can build a proper snowman.

HANNA RASKIN

Hanna Raskin is food editor and chief critic of *The Post and Courier* in Charleston, South Carolina, the South's oldest daily newspaper. Her work has been recognized by the Association of Alternative Newsmedia; the International Association of Culinary Professionals; and the James Beard Foundation, which in 2017 awarded her its first Local Impact Journalism prize. Raskin is also the president of the Association of Food Journalists, which in 2016 honored her with awards for "Best Restaurant Criticism" and "Best Food Business Story." Raskin is a food historian by training and wrote her master's thesis on the relationship between Jews and Chinese food; she's since written about immigrant food culture and regional history for numerous publications. She's also really good at finding the weirdest museum in any town she visits.

Top: Bita Honarvar; Bottom: Allisyn Miller Morgan

TOMMY TOMLINSON

Tommy Tomlinson is the author of the memoir *The Elephant in the Room* (Simon & Schuster), about life as an overweight man in a growing America. He is also the host of the podcast "SouthBound" in partnership with WFAE, Charlotte's NPR station. The podcast features conversations with notable Southerners from all walks of life. Tomlinson has written for publications including *Esquire*, *ESPN the Magazine*, *Sports Illustrated, Forbes, Garden & Gun*, and many others. He spent twenty-three years as a reporter and local columnist for *The Charlotte Observer*. He is a graduate of the University of Georgia and was a 2008-2009 Nieman Fellow at Harvard University. Tomlinson and his wife, Alix Felsing, live in Charlotte. As for secret talents, he plays a solid game of rec-room ping-pong.

HOLLY LYNTON

Photographer Holly Lynton's work focuses on understanding rural communities in the United States through their agricultural history and current industry, highlighting the importance of having unmediated experiences with the natural world. In a new project, she examines the concept of faith and its manifestations in contemporary society. A Boulder, Colorado native, Holly studied photography at Yale and earned an MFA from Bard College in 2000. Since then, she has received many awards and grants to support her work, which has been exhibited internationally in both solo and group exhibitions. This year, she was awarded a research fellowship at Yale in conjunction with her photography series on Methodist camp meetings in South Carolina. Her secret talents include aerial swing dancing and, more recently, flying trapeze.

Top: Jeff Cravotta; Bottom: Gutter credit

FUTURE OF THE RESTAURANT

An invitation to join us in Birmingham

BY JOHN T. EDGE

IT'S EARLY MORNING HERE AT Barnard Observatory. I stare at a pair of white boards, jammed with talk ideas and speaker names. Scribbled during an all-staff brainstorm, those boards are the bones of our Spring Symposium. When we gather in Birmingham on March 28, SFA aims to chart the future of the restaurant.

You noticed, no doubt, our choice to use the word "Southern" as a modifier for the word "restaurant." We're not quitting the South. SFA works from a base in the South to ask questions that are national in scope and impact. We believe that the South is an ideal place to host American dialogues about race, class, gender, and more. Especially in this moment, when our nation has begun to recognize that problems previously defined as Southern are, in fact and truth, American.

At 2020 events, SFA will ask, *Can the South leverage its tragic and triumphant histories to lead culturally, intellectually, morally?*

We focus on restaurants in Birmingham, because, as David Beriss and David Sutton argue in *The Restaurants Book: Ethnographies of Where We Eat*, the restaurant is an "ideal postmodern institution." Study restaurants and you reckon with production, consumption, and destruction, as well as tribalism, nationalism, and globalism.

With those possibilities in mind, I recently spoke with twenty-plus SFA members about whom we should invite to present, what they should address, and what we should embrace and avoid. Those conversations challenged and inspired me. And those conversations bore fruit that will flower when we gather in Birmingham.

Staff interests and curiosities help drive SFA work. That's always been part of the pleasure. I can remember back in 2002 when SFA staffers and board members began to imagine our first barbecue symposium. As we talked, I looked around the table, gobsmacked that crowd of smart people saw the same promise in the lives and labors of pitmasters. In that moment, I felt like I was getting away with something. In this moment, as we program a symposium on the future of the restaurant, I feel the same.

Most weekend mornings, I retreat to a tin shed in our Oxford backyard to read and write. For the last few months, I've been trying to figure out how to write a book about my relationship to restaurants and bars. When I talk to people about my book, I explain my backstory. As a boy, I began to make homes in restaurants: first at Old Clinton Bar-B-Q, just up the road. Later, over dim sum at Canton House in Atlanta. More recently, in Oxford, where I claimed a morning perch at the low counter that anchors Bottletree Bakery.

In stories told from the South and beyond, at tables heavy with good food and drink, along an arc that spans my childhood and today, I am trying to make meaning of our American search to make homes in restaurants and bars, where we gather to eat and drink and belong. The SFA is on the same path. At a time when restaurants are barometers of cultures, incubators of communities, drivers of economies, and unique sites of inequities, we embrace those same burdens and promises.

As this journal goes to press, SFA has already booked some speakers, including Khushbu Shah, *Food & Wine* restaurant editor, and John Hall, Birmingham restaurateur and chef. And we have begun production on a documentary. Focused on the barbecue legacies of Roscoe Hall and Rodney Scott, that new film will debut that March day. By the time you read these words, all the speakers will be secured, that whiteboard will be wiped clean, and tickets will be on sale. SFA is excited to ask these future-tense questions. We're proud to tell these stories. Please join us in Birmingham.

John T. Edge is the founding director of SFA and the host of TrueSouth *on the SEC Network/ESPN.*

Adobe Stock

THE EDUCATION OF CYNTHIA AND NELSON

Forget Paris. Let's go to Chattanooga.

BY GUSTAVO ARELLANO

EVERY YEAR, AFTER MY WIFE Delilah and I return home to California from our annual summer road trip to the South, our friends help us unload our packed Yukon with a tinge of jealousy.

They marvel at the treasures that emerge from my SUV like a reverse game of Tetris. Cases of bourbons and Tennessee whiskeys. Bags of grits and flour from Weisenberger Mills in Midway, Kentucky. Vintage cookbooks from small-town churches and civic groups. Enough cast-iron skillets to melt down and turn into a skyscraper.

We bring stuff for ourselves, yes, but most of our goodies are presents. And after twelve years of vacationing in the South, I've learned the most valuable gifts are stories. Not just of our adventures, but also the lessons we've learned.

That the South isn't the antebellum nightmare that Californians read about in high-school history books or watch in Hollywood films. How *el Sur* has dramatically changed even in the time we've summered there. Why two Mexicans feel perfectly at home in a place that's supposed to be the antithesis of our liberal, multicultural Golden State.

We always invite our friends to join us in the South; most express interest, especially after they see everything we bring back. But they inevitably beg off. Money or time isn't the issue, because Delilah and I always smirk at the selfies from Paris, the Bahamas, and other tourist hot spots that they post on social media.

The excuse we usually hear from our friends, almost exclusively people of color or progressive whites, is that the South is too "foreign" for them. That they wouldn't feel comfortable.

To them, I present Cynthia and Nelson. This year, Delilah and I took them on a weekend trip to Chattanooga, Tennessee,

Illustration by Kristen Solecki

and surrounding small towns.

The husband-and-wife Latinx couple had a general appreciation for Southern cuisine, or at least how it manifests on the West Coast—mostly hot chicken, mint juleps, and barbecue.

But they had never been to the South.

As we planned our trip, I warned Cynthia and Nelson of the biggest issues they'd encounter. The weather was going to be stiflingly hot and humid. They would see Confederate flags and Donald Trump paraphernalia. Tabasco would be the hot sauce lingua franca, not Tapatío.

And we'd be brown specks in a sea of white.

SELLING CYNTHIA and Nelson on Chattanooga proved simple. We ate well at St. John's, Alleia, Flying Squirrel, and other restaurants around the city. But they were also fascinated by how a new generation of Southern chefs so warmly embraced Mexican food.

Something about the soda tasted familiar. Then I saw the bottle. It was *Mexican* Coke.

At Public House downtown, the menu advertised a fish taco special and boasted about how they sourced corn tortillas from a local *tortillería*. Main Street Meats, with its well-stocked charcuterie and cheese cases, served Pelotón de la Muerte, a mezcal brand none of us had ever tasted.

"Mezcal is starting to get big here," the jovial bartender told us. He made Nelson a strong cocktail made with Pelotón, chile bitters, and Mexican mineral water. I chose the Homegrown: Chattanooga Whiskey, peanuts, and Coke.

Something about the soda tasted familiar. Then I saw the bottle. It was *Mexican* Coke.

In the city that hosted the world's first Coca-Cola bottling plant, the Mexican version now reigned.

Cynthia and Nelson enjoyed the food, although they confessed that Delilah's take on pimento cheese, which she spikes with pickled jalapeños, is better. Most importantly, they loved the sense of community found in Chattanooga's dining scene. Many of the menus thanked local and regional farms as ingredient sources; servers freely plugged competitors when they found out we were out-of-towners.

"You don't see that back in Southern California," said Cynthia, a food writer by trade. "Chefs back home are just too self-centered to even think that."

Cynthia and Nelson's Southern education was off to a good start. But the true test came the following day, when we'd travel Highway 127 from Chattanooga to Jamestown and partake in the World's Longest Yard Sale, the annual mega-flea market.

We wouldn't be in the big city anymore.

Cynthia and Nelson are used to navigating white spaces in their respective professions (he's in the financial industry), but not in small towns among working-class folks. After the first stop, they looked a little wary.

"I haven't been around so many white people for a minute," Nelson cracked.

But their discomfort quickly dissipated when we stopped near Pikeville, where Delilah and I have befriended many vendors over the years. We introduced them to Cynthia and Nelson, and they welcomed the two. "Let California know we're not that scary!" one joked. "We're just Americans like y'all!"

There were more people of color this year than I've ever seen during the World's Longest Yard Sale—not many, but still. We even heard Latinx families openly speak Spanish with confidence. It was a rejoinder of sorts to viral videos from recent years in which white Southerners can be seen berating Latinos for speaking Spanish.

"Everyone is so polite, so nice," Cynthia said as we drove back to our hotel. "Is this South the real one?"

"It's the South we know," I replied.

The South Delilah and I love.

ON THE FLIGHT back home, Cynthia and Nelson were already making plans to return next year. We want to visit Louisville and trek Kentucky's Bourbon Trail. Maybe we'll hit Dollywood, too.

A Latinx couple from Southern California hyping the South to another Latinx couple from Southern California—that's proof our country is changing for the better, right?

It's a rosy view, for sure. I won't claim to know firsthand the struggles that my Latinx friends who live in the region deal with on a regular basis.

But I also know that my takeaways from the region—its food, people, ever-evolving sense of self—are lessons all Americans should learn and experience. Those of us who know this side of the South never stop promoting those virtues.

And with Cynthia and Nelson, y'all got two more acolytes.

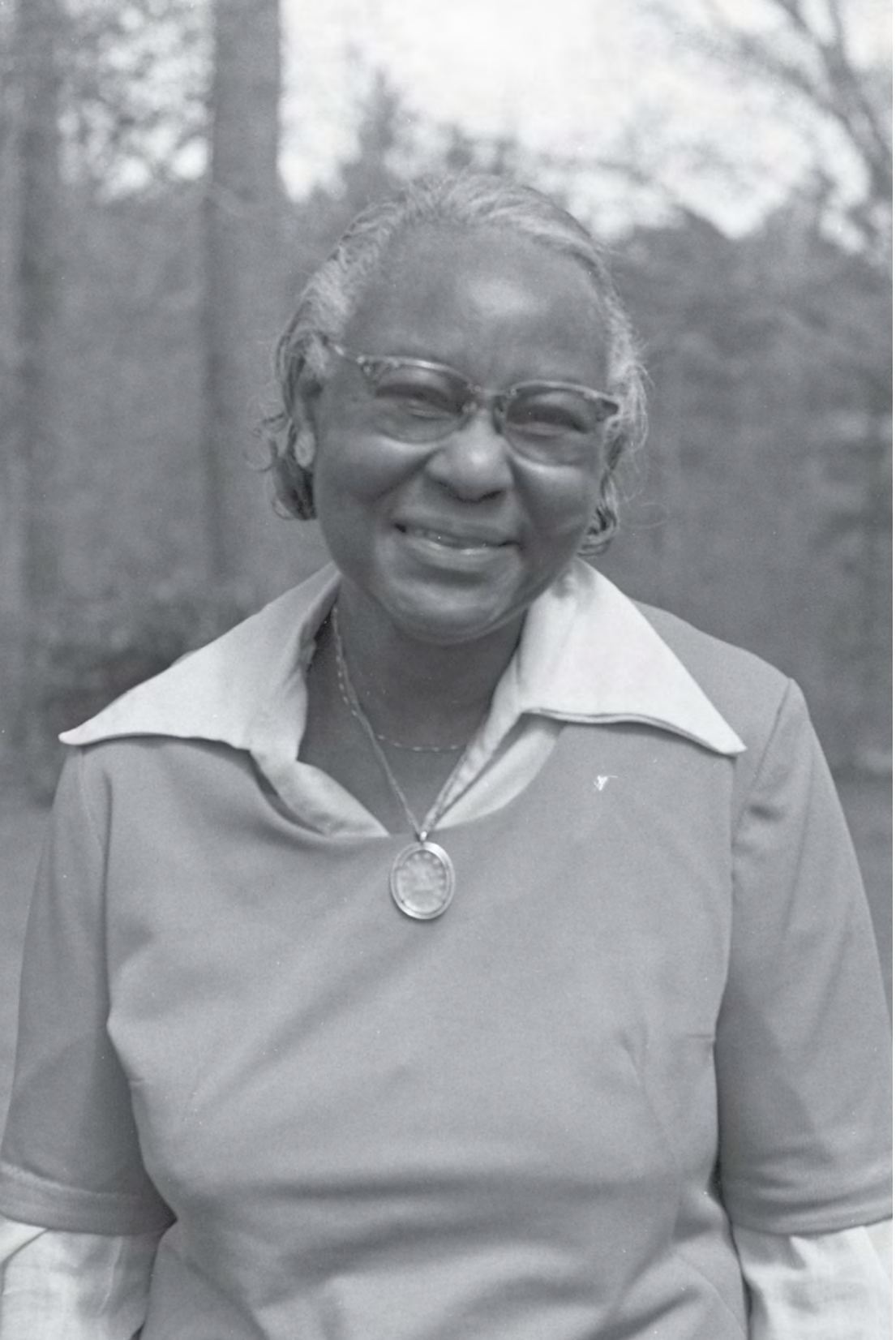
Gustavo Arellano is Gravy*'s columnist and a features reporter for* the Los Angeles Times.

A MIND TO STAY HERE

Edna Lewis had unsung culinary sisters. Flora Mae Hunter was one.

BY ROSALIND BENTLEY

Mrs. Flora Mae Hunter's cooking on a Florida estate delighted captains of industry and even British royalty.



PREVIOUS SPREAD: Library of Congress; OPPOSITE PAGE: State Archives of Florida/Belland

MY GRANDFATHER'S IMPALA WAS dark green, wide as a battleship, and smelled like rotten bananas.

He retired in the 1970s and spent a lot of time driving to visit old friends near his childhood home at the northern edge of Leon County, Florida. The bananas were road snacks. If he picked up the car keys, he picked up a banana. Nothing makes a car smell like garbage faster than a spent banana peel baked in the Florida heat. It's a big reason why, as a kid, I avoided riding with him on those afternoon visits. Plus, he was just going to see old people.

Mrs. Flora Mae Hunter was one of those old people. Everybody we knew raved about her cooking. She and her husband, Peter Hunter, knew my paternal grandparents from the plantations where they grew up and worked much of their lives, just north of Tallahassee along the Florida-Georgia border.

I was confused by that when I was growing up. The math didn't add up. Mrs. Hunter and my grandfather were born five years apart on adjacent plantations. She in 1911. He in 1906. There was no way the Hunters or my grandparents could have been enslaved. My grandparents didn't talk about sharecropping. So why in the world had they all grown up on *plantations*? Why were they *born* on plantations? Why did their churches still stand on the fringes of plantations? Why did those plantations still exist? Those questions crossed my mind from time to time, back then, but my curiosity was fleeting.

Now, on the cusp of being an "old" myself, the importance of their lives resonates, particularly Mrs. Hunter's. Posthumously, she helped me find answers to my queries, through a 159-page cookbook she wrote in the 1970s: *Born in the Kitchen: Plain and Fancy Plantation Fixin's*. For nearly forty years, she cooked at one of the biggest plantations in north Florida.

Told through a series of menus and the recipes that Mrs. Hunter served during her career, *Born in the Kitchen* is a document of Southern food and foodways. It is also a palimpsest, a story of access, gatekeepers, and paternalism that can accompany staggering wealth. She tells the story of Northern scions who bought hundreds of thousands of acres of game-rich land during and after Reconstruction. Land where Mrs. Hunter's ancestors (and mine) had been enslaved. Whitneys, Hannas, Vanderbilts, and Bakers, these industrialists and financiers built Gilded-Age winter retreats, in the style of European manor homes. They roamed their estates on horseback and custom wagons in grand hunts. Those "captains of industry" also recreated a version of the Old South, where black people like the Hunters and my paternal grandparents played roles from which they were only one or two generations removed. In so many ways, their twentieth-century freedom was ostensible.

Yet I don't want to rob Mrs. Hunter. For her book is also a witness for black female cooks who didn't board the Great Migration train north, as Miss Edna Lewis did. It's the story of those who stayed behind and were never "discovered" or anointed by the so-called "right" people (white people) who might have brought them national recognition or fortune. Black women like Mrs. Hunter helped pour the foundation of American cooking. They grew crops and foraged gems from the woods and fields. They knew how to dress game and scale fish, because they or their husbands or brothers hunted or fished. They canned because it was essential. Mrs. Hunter's book also demonstrates how she tried to adapt over time (with varying degrees of success) to the increasing availability of convenience foods, even as she held onto the old ways. As I turn the pages, I realize

she made her kitchen a place of power.

I wish I'd endured the sickly-sweet smell of my grandfather's Impala and spent some time watching her work.

BEFORE I TALK about Mrs. Hunter's suggested method for preparing pan quail in the field or her roasted doves, I have to tell you about the place where she cooked those meals, because Southern African American history always begins with the land.

The Red Hills is a rich ribbon of rust-colored earth bleeding down from the southwest Georgia border where it eventually pools into the hills of Tallahassee. When most people think of Florida's cash crop, they think citrus, which has been a leader since the 1870s. But oranges and grapefruit don't grow well in the red clay of the Florida-Georgia borderlands. Cotton does. Leon County, where Mrs. Hunter worked, was a regional cotton powerhouse in the mid-1800s. Antebellum fortunes were made on that land and on the backs of enslaved workers like Mrs. Hunter's great-grandmother.

The Civil War (it always comes back to that) ruined those Southern planters. Many sold their land. Where they all went, I don't know, but in came the wealthiest of Northerners, looking for places to escape their numbing, brittle winters. They found it in the Red Hills, reached by a Southern spur of the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad. The region was a blanket of ponds, pine, live oak, and wire grass, which meant plenty of mullet, bream, deer, quail, duck, and doves to fish and hunt.

Those newcomers also encountered thousands of black people who had never left the only homes they knew. Some had bought their own small farms by then or worked as tenant farmers on white-owned farms. Plenty of others needed steady work. They knew the fields, woods, and ponds, and how to catch and cook the yield.

"We focus on the people leaving and we say they were so smart to leave, but I'd argue those who were smart enough to stay knew they could eke a life out of their surroundings," University of Arkansas history professor Cherisse Jones-Branch told me not long ago. I wanted to know why people stayed. Women like Mrs. Hunter's grandmother, born to enslaved parents during the Civil War, had choices to make. "They did a serious cost-benefit analysis," Professor Jones-Branch said, "and made decisions based on that."

During slavery, people built communities. Those deep bonds didn't dissolve with emancipation. Her community embraced Mrs. Hunter from birth and held her close as she grew into womanhood.

FLORA MAE ROSS was born on the Springhill Plantation just across the Georgia line in Thomas County. Her father, Eddie Ross, worked as a handyman there, and her mother, Lessie Ross, cooked. When Flora Mae was a toddler, the family moved a few miles south across the border to Leon County, Florida. They worked at Sunny Hill Plantation in the same roles. Sunny Hill belonged to Lewis Thompson. His father had been the treasurer and secretary of Standard Oil, at the time the mightiest corporation in America. Mrs. Hunter's mother became Sunny Hill's head cook.

"'I quit school when I was fifteen years old, to help my mother in the kitchen or to do whatever else there was to be done,'" Mrs. Hunter wrote in the preface to *Born in the Kitchen*. "I worked with her for four years, learning many of her original cooking secrets and those that she passed on to me from my grandmother.'"

At eighteen years old, she got the first of several jobs at three adjacent plantations including Foshalee, where my grandfather worked as a driver. Those early

Her repertoire spanned everything from modest rice cakes (pictured, in a demonstration) to pigtail pilau, turtle soup, pan-broiled venison, and carrot soup.

State Archives of Florida/Dyen

kitchen jobs allowed her to travel outside the South at least twice with her employers for a few months at a time. She wrote of trips to Cleveland, Ohio and Morrisburg, Ontario. Did the new surroundings open her eyes to what lay beyond the Red Hills? Did she sense possibility?

One of her employers wanted her to stay on as her traveling chef, but "'I didn't like traveling,'" Mrs. Hunter wrote.

Travel inspired her contemporary, Miss Edna Lewis, born about four and a half years after Mrs. Hunter. Miss Lewis came from a similarly tight-knit community in Virginia, but the origin and name said much about its aspirations: Freetown. The lessons and kitchen skills Miss Lewis learned there were the building blocks of her storied life in New York City. She could take in the magic of Fifth Avenue from her perch as a window dresser at Bonwit Teller. Her simple, elegant cooking earned her a partnership in Café Nicholson with her friend, Johnny Nicholson. That tiny Manhattan spot exposed her to some of the twentieth entury's seminal writers, actors and thinkers: Truman Capote, Paul Robeson, Gore Vidal, among them.

Sometimes I wonder, was Mrs. Hunter intimidated? She was so young, so far away from home in such white cities. Did she get to leave the kitchen often enough to explore new places and meet new people? Did she experience the beauty of Montreal during her time in Ontario? How would she have gotten around and how much was she paid? I may forever seek those answers. As an anthropologist at the University of Maryland (Baltimore County), Ashanté Reese engages similar questions. She reminded me of something that's painful to acknowledge: "It's hard for people to imagine the fullness of what their lives can be when you have been living under constraint."

So, Mrs. Hunter went back to Foshalee and married Peter Hunter, and they moved to Horseshoe Plantation. She was just twenty-one years old. George F.

Baker, Jr., the owner of what would become Citibank, owned the 12,000-plus acre plantation. There, she would cement her reputation among British royalty, and other wealthy visitors, as perhaps the best cook in the region.

THOUGH THE BUSIEST time at Horseshoe was late fall to late winter, maintaining the grounds and cleaning the main house was year-round work. The busy season meant Mrs. Hunter rarely left the kitchen. For decades, the cooks at the Horseshoe Plantation manse tended two wood-burning stoves. Mrs. Hunter or an assistant would heat them up early each day. A photo from the late 1950s shows them clad in matching gingham dresses and head scarves.

If you were a guest at Horseshoe, you had your choice of at least thirteen different breakfast menus to suit your dietary whims.

Horseshoe Elegance

Fresh Strawberries
Fried Sausage Patties
Fried Green Apple Rings
3-minute soft boiled eggs
Pancakes
Coffee/Tea

The Mackerel Down East

½ Grapefruit or small glass of Apple Juice
Steamed Mackerel (see recipe)
Buck Wheat Cakes with Maple Syrup
Coffee/Tea

"The Duke and Duchess" was a favorite of the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, AKA, the abdicator, King Edward VIII and his American wife, Wallis Simpson. They were occasional guests at Horseshoe. Their namesake breakfast was spartan: applesauce, cereal, dry toast, and coffee.

Mrs. Hunter wrote that early in her tenure, Baker summoned her to the formal dining room of the mansion to say that her food was the best he'd eaten since coming south from New York. Her pride in the compliment glows from the page.

Hunting season ran from December through March. A January 1955 article in *Sports Illustrated* described an excursion in lavish detail, from the demeanor of the dogs to the design of the wagon ferrying parties on the lookout for quail coveys. In a photo, six well-heeled guests sit under an ancient live oak, bundled for the cool afternoon. Among them are then Air Force Secretary Harold E. Talbott and his wife, Margaret, and Robert R. Young, the former head of the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad and New York Central Railroad. A long table, draped in checkered cloth, is decked with china place settings. One guest is opening a bottle of wine. They are about to eat a meal likely prepared by Mrs. Hunter in the hours before dawn.

The wiregrass meadows were also important workplaces for her and her husband, Peter, during a hunt. He was the plantation's butler. He also accompanied hunting parties. In a clearing in the brush, he would cook game, dressed by his wife from a previous day's hunt. Using just butter, salt, and pepper, he cooked in a cast iron pan over an open flame.

"The things they couldn't cook in the field, Miss Flora would cook in advance," said family friend Viceola Sykes. Mrs. Sykes' mother trained under Mrs. Hunter and later took over at Horseshoe after Mrs. Hunter retired.

The first course was usually a soup—maybe carrot, followed by a simple salad such as lettuce wedges, drizzled with a dressing of peanut oil, red vinegar, sugar, salt, and cayenne pepper. Spinach or rutabaga greens might cradle the quail.

The *Sports Illustrated* article never mentions Mrs. Hunter.

But Mrs. Sykes saw how hard she worked. Mrs. Hunter had to please the tastes of her employer and his guests, but also the thirty-member household staff which her husband supervised. The task required what I might call culinary code switching, which shows up throughout *Born in the Kitchen*: pigtail pilau with a side of fried okra and peach cobbler for the workers; turtle soup, pan-broiled venison, and tapioca pudding for the Bakers.

Mrs. Sykes was born on Foshalee Plantation. She went on to get her master's degree and taught accounting at colleges from San Diego to Tallahassee. She's in her late seventies now. We spoke on the phone for nearly an hour recently, as she told me stories of life at Horseshoe.

"One of the things they would cook for those Northerners was wild duck," Mrs. Sykes told me. "And the way Mrs. Hunter cooked them, they were rare, and they'd just eat the breast."

It nearly broke me when Mrs. Sykes described what Mrs. Hunter did with the leftovers. She took the rare portions of the duck that weren't eaten and gave them to staffers. They took the remnants home and cooked them until "fully done." In that way, an old plantation practice from slavery remained unbroken: You take the scraps, they strengthen you, and you endure.

WHEN MRS. HUNTER retired around 1970 to the red-brick house she and her husband had built near Horseshoe, she decided to write a cookbook. Her culinary stature had spread beyond the plantation through word of mouth and a few articles in my hometown newspaper, the *Tallahassee Democrat*. But for nearly a decade she struggled to gain interest among publishers. In a 1978 article in the *Democrat* she told the newspaper's food editor that she didn't have enough money to pay to print the book herself.

It's not lost on me that during this same period, Miss Lewis met Knopf editor Judith Jones. In a 2015 *New York Times* article, Francis Lam describes how Evangeline Peterson, a socialite and patron, introduced Miss Lewis to Jones at the recommendation of a Random House executive. Jones was entranced by Miss Lewis' stories of Freetown, farming, and family. Those meetings with influential white women in New York City birthed *The Taste of Country Cooking*. Miss Lewis' legend was cemented.

I say that with respect. Miss Lewis' roast chicken recipe is the only one I use. Those women didn't make her. She made herself. That said, without them, it's likely she would have been less well known and celebrated. I can't help but juxtapose her trajectory with Mrs. Hunter's.

After the 1978 newspaper article, Thelma Thurston Gorham, a journalism professor at Florida A&M University, a historically black university about fifteen miles from Horseshoe (and my alma mater), took on Mrs. Hunter's project. Gorham enlisted the help of one of the school's librarians to copyedit and a graphic artist in the media center pen the illustrations. The

She took the rare portions of the duck that weren't eaten and gave them to staffers. They took the remnants home and cooked them until "fully done."

Bakers' daughter, Florence B. Martineau, identified some of her favorite dishes to include in the book and Charlotte Rosenberg, owner of a small local printing company, published it in 1979.

The book is a labor of love. Which makes me feel especially guilty when I flip through its pages and wonder how it might have been done differently. Mrs. Hunter might have told more stories about her youth, her parents, and grandparents and how they nourished themselves. But those recollections are not present. Reading her recipe for squirrel, I wondered where she learned her butchery skills. Many of the recipes seem reflective of her later years in the kitchen. But I wanted to hear about the ways her mother and grandmother taught her to cook by sight, taste, and feel. The incursion of convenience ingredients into Mrs. Hunter's recipes, such as steak sauces, frozen vegetables, and margarine, isn't explained. She had reasons. Maybe they saved her time, but I wanted to hear her say why.

Toni Tipton-Martin included *Born in the Kitchen* in her book, *The Jemima Code*. She told me I should stop my longing, which bordered on judging.

"This is how we've been ensnared as a people: not respecting the foodcraft," she said to me. "These are African American recipes."

In making them, Mrs. Hunter adapted and persevered. By recording them, she "changed the record of what it meant to be a black cook in the face of the Aunt Jemima stereotype," Tipton-Martin said.

The book got a good review in the *Democrat*. In 1988, the state of Florida honored her with a Folk Heritage Award for "over seventy years of knowledge of traditional Southern foodways" and "life-long devotion to the folk arts." She sat in the front row at the awards ceremony, her hair just so, her bearing one of quiet dignity.

"It's quite an honor," she told the *Democrat*. "I've never been so surprised in all my life."

My copy of her book was signed in 1991. It was in its fifth printing by then. It stands on a shelf in the pantry next to works by women I consider her culinary sisters: Lewis, Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor, Norma Jean and Carole Darden among them. The inscription simply reads, "Flora Mae Hunter. Happy Cooking." She died in 2003, at ninety-two years old.

I don't want to fetishize Mrs. Hunter. In our rush to uplift a few we miss others—and there were so many—it can be easy to forget that until the late 1960s, one of the main forms of employment open to black women was domestic work, like cooking. Those women were part of a centuries-long tradition. They had stories to tell and recipes they could have shared with the world. I can only imagine what the American culinary canon would look like now had their accounts been recorded, their work taken seriously.

So, here is Mrs. Flora Mae Ross Hunter, from the Red Hills of the Georgia-Florida border. Her book is a witness of what it meant to be an African American cook as her corner of the Deep South changed, and in critical, telling ways, remained the same.

On page forty-six of her book, she included a recipe for "Fried Bananas Served with Steaks." The thought of it makes me smell that Impala again. But what I wouldn't give now for a chance to ride in it once again, back to an afternoon full of summer visits. No, I really don't like bananas, but for Mrs. Hunter's sake, maybe I'll make that recipe someday.

Rosalind Bentley is a senior writer at The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. *She is a Pulitzer Prize finalist and received her MFA from the University of Georgia.*

Illustration by Gutter Credit

SERVING AND BEING SERVED

Hell is needing other people.

BY JENNA MASON

I STRODE CONFIDENTLY INTO MY interview with the chef-owner. I had a dozen years of serving experience and solid industry references.

I explained that I'd never worked at a white-tablecloth restaurant and emphasized my eagerness to learn. I walked away twenty minutes later with a W-9 in my hand and a start date on my calendar.

In my first few days, I learned my way around the kitchen, the walk-in, the servers' station, the computer system. I followed servers, and I ran food. After shifts, I studied *The World Atlas of Wine* and memorized French "mother sauces" and their derivatives.

Sporadically, after interacting with a table, a veteran server would ask if I had questions. I rarely did. Serving had always come naturally, and I geeked out learning the cuisine and terminology. I aced every menu test.

Chef complimented my work ethic. He put me on the floor just days before graduation at the university that sustains our town. I sipped bourbon on my front porch that evening to celebrate. I'd made the cut.

My first serving shifts taught me that the finer points of fine dining had little to do with describing a Côtes du Rhône or distinguishing a demi-glace from a bordelaise.

In my obsession with learning information, I had failed to study the norms and rituals that would be second nature to someone who dined out often. I'd taken for granted that my expertise waiting tables at casual restaurants would transfer seamlessly to this new environment.

Chef took pleasure in teaching me otherwise. He belittled employees for any and every mistake.

I learned more: When my table stands to leave, I must be waiting to hold the

door for them. When I drop a check, I must pick it up within seconds of the guest inserting their payment. When a guest excuses herself, I must immediately fold her napkin over the back of her chair. I must never set a bottle of wine on a table before pouring.

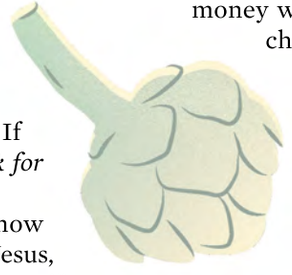
I must not introduce myself.

"That's for f---ing Applebee's," Chef scowled.

Friends asked: Did I love my new job? Wasn't I just so happy to be waiting tables again? Was I making good money? I crafted a standard reply.

"The money is great. The environment is ... intense."

With that pause, I tried to convey what I couldn't say out loud in a small and gossipy town.



The condescending and contradictory scolding infuriated me: "If you don't know something, you *have to ask*. If you're in the weeds, *ask for help*. Just f---ing ask!"

Then, "You don't know what's in a gremolata? Jesus, it's three f---ing ingredients!" Or, "It's a beurre blanc, *not a béarnaise*. BUR. BLAHNK. *Why do you even work here?*"

I redoubled my efforts, mostly out of spite. I pushed myself to master the menu better than anyone on the floor. I pressured the bartenders to let me open every bottle of wine for practice. I coached newer employees off the clock in hopes I could spare them unwarranted humiliation. I never showed a negative emotion. And I kept asking for help no matter how many times Chef called me an "idiot."

I learned how to provide meticulous service in an environment that demanded it, but all I cared about was proving Chef wrong. Eighteen months later, with an array of new skills and not a drop of regret, I put in my two weeks. When I thanked Chef for everything I'd learned, he shrugged. He mumbled, "Okay," and turned back to the grill.

Armed with hard-won experience, I secured a serving position at a new restaurant and excelled. Management recognized my familiarity with upscale dining, and the very green serving staff occasionally looked to me for assistance. Things went swell for three years.

Then, this July, I slipped on a rain-slicked crosswalk and broke my kneecap clean in half.

The aftermath of that accident overwhelmed me. In mid-June, I had ended a three-year relationship, and despite some assistance from my former partner, money was already very tight. In the chaos of moving, I had failed to realize my health insurance expired at the end of that month. I couldn't have afforded surgery and physical therapy, even if I could have continued waiting tables. Now I would miss football season altogether, the most lucrative months for servers in my college town.

Friends drove me around and brought me meals. My dad loaned me money to get through my first round of utility bills. My children's father took them everywhere they needed to go. My bosses at my day job gave me unprecedented flexibility, while my coworkers picked up my slack.

All this kindness humbled and reassured me. I felt proud of myself for letting folks help and sometimes even asking for help. I pictured Chef yelling at me over the pass, "If you're in the weeds, ask for help!" I laughed to think that lessons from that awful job might just get me through this.

I stayed optimistic those first few weeks of recovery, but the emotional strain of needing so much steadily wore me down. I started lying about having a ride when I really used taxis and Ubers for four out of five errands. I used cash advances from my credit card to pay for basic needs, knowing the interest rate far exceeded what I could repay.

I gained a new understanding of the saying, "It's better to give than to receive." Giving feels good. Receiving sucks.

I grew anxious about my dwindling finances. Without health insurance, I had to prepay every visit to the orthopedist, to physical therapy, and to my primary care doctor, whom I had to see every fifteen days to refill my pain medication. The price of my routine antidepressants soared from about $10 to $125, so I cut back on them.

I couldn't have afforded surgery and physical therapy, even if I could have continued waiting tables. Now I would miss football season altogether, the most lucrative months for servers in my college town.

My paychecks are direct-deposited into an out-of-state bank, and that debit card was canceled because of fraudulent activity. For more than a week, I couldn't access what little money I had.

In August, I learned that I was still on the hook for a lease my ex-boyfriend and I had signed back in February. I owed twice the rent on half my usual income.

Checks bounced. Overdraft fees mounted.

I totaled up exactly how much I needed immediately to get myself back in the black. More than $7,000 dollars, not counting the major medical expenses for which I'd sought assistance. I consulted my dad to strategize, but we struggled to find any short-term options for getting me out of the hole.

ON A TUESDAY in mid-September, I dropped the ground turkey I was opening to make hamburgers for my kids. I fell apart. The only other food in the house was ramen—the cheap kind—and we'd eaten ramen the previous two nights in a row. I called my ex-husband to pick up our children, and I panicked myself to sleep.

When I got home from work the next afternoon, my electricity had been cut off. I was certain a paycheck would clear the next morning, and I'd be able to get the lights turned back on. It didn't.

I was no longer in the weeds. I was in a f---ing forest, paralyzed.

I called my best friend and told her everything through sobs. She paid to get my electricity reconnected. She rallied friends and acquaintances, and dozens donated whatever they could to help. In less than a week, I knew I would be okay, at least long enough to plan my next move.

I also knew that, as with many other things, Chef was only half-right. The real lesson here is not to ask for help when you're in the weeds, it's this: *Don't wait until you're in the weeds to ask for help.*

Jenna Mason is a freelance writer and editor with twenty years of experience in the restaurant industry.

The Hidden Costs of Food Festivals

Chefs are on the hook for the bill

by **HANNA RASKIN**

If a white Southerner in 1917

told you he spent Saturday afternoon at a food festival, you'd have a pretty good idea of what he meant. The hallmarks of a food festival were proud people and a local crop. We don't know what happened right after this picture was taken in Fairfield, Alabama, but the men might have had themselves a seed-spitting contest. The women might have swapped jars of watermelon pickles. In any case, there was food, and it was festive.

Illustrations by Delphine Lee; THIS PAGE: Library of Congress

More than a century later, Southern food festivals are still festive. But they are also glamorous, trendy, and boozy, with drag brunches, bourbon dinners, chef competitions, and yoga that ends with rosé for all.

Cities love these events—because as tourism drivers, they are champions.

In Charleston, where I live, the economic impact of the 2019 festival was estimated at $18 million. Beyond that, the festival estimates half a billion people saw the city and its food mentioned in some kind of media about the event. Its programming drew 25,000 people, with more than 40 percent of them coming from households making at least $200,000 a year.

As that last statistic suggests, food festivals have become the province of the very wealthy, largely because low-wage workers can't afford the price of admission. Since the modern food festival model was refined in the mid-2000s by events including the South Beach Wine & Food Festival and the Charleston festival, the cost of an entry wristband to tasting tents in cities from Nashville to Austin has surged. One hundred years ago in Fairfield, if you showed up with a watermelon tucked under your arm, all you needed to do was find someone with a knife to split it for the fun to begin. By contrast, a Saturday tent pass to the most recent edition of Atlanta Food & Wine would have set you back 100 bucks.

But that's just one narrow way of looking at how much food festivals cost in 2019. There is also an argument to be made that these glitzy festivals are having a corrosive effect on our collective food culture and may be holding back the very chefs and restaurants they're supposed to support.

Anyone who has manned a booth in a tasting tent knows that ticketholders tend to ask the same questions. They want to know where your restaurant is located and if the cracker beneath the scallop ceviche you're serving is gluten-free. If they're relatively hip, they might ask whether the seafood is sustainable.

What they never ask is how much you're getting paid to spend the day away from your restaurant, cutting up shellfish and smiling.

Many would be surprised to discover the answer is nothing. And most of them would be shocked to learn you paid for the seafood, the table, and the tablecloth too.

Imagine you're a food festival organizer putting together a budget for next year's program. You're going to allot a certain amount of money for wineglass rentals, security, ticket systems, and everything else required to manage thousands of drunk, hungry people. None of those items are cheap. Yet almost without exception, the budget line for chef stipends is zero, unless the festival has lined up Guy Fieri or some other TV star.

In other words, the people whom ticket buyers are paying to see aren't making even a fraction of what a festival would spend on sign installation, portable toilets, or electricians. As Oxford, Mississippi restaurateur John Currence told me, "It's like they're putting on a Bonnaroo and not paying the bands."

Festival defenders are bound to say chefs aren't walking away from these events with checks. But it's great exposure, right? A chef with a restaurant in a little out-of-the-way mountain town can wow folks on the coast with smoked trout, and the next time they're driving along Interstate 40, they'll know where to go for dinner. Or maybe someone at the festival will write up that trout in a magazine or tell a James Beard judge about how delicately it was sauced. All of that could count as indirect payment for participation.

Except that chefs know the rewards

of so-called exposure are few. In part, that's because chefs at the vast majority of festivals don't get to pick their event assignments. They're not getting to show off their signature dishes or brand of hospitality.

For example, Sarah Adams, an independent chef in Charleston, makes her living primarily through private gigs in exclusive vacation destinations. But she's not associated with a restaurant, so festival organizers generally station her at events that appeal to people who aren't comfortable spending serious money on food. At those events, ticketholders will sometimes ask Sarah if she'd like to make cookies for their sister's baby shower. That's not the kind of business Sarah wants.

More commonly, exposure amounts to meeting festivalgoers who have no intention of ever visiting the city where a chef's restaurant is located. Years ago, that was considered a plus of the festival format: Before social media was pervasive, festivals were one of the best ways to share ideas with fellow chefs and the eating public at large. But Instagram now does a better job of broadcasting novel techniques and interesting ingredients.

So why are any chefs continuing to sign up for festivals? In on-the-record interviews with more than a dozen chefs across the country, it quickly became clear that there are two main reasons why chefs haven't walked off the circuit.

One, for chefs from historically marginalized groups, the risks associated with turning down an opportunity for mainstream recognition feel high. When a door has long been closed, many chefs are understandably willing to pay a toll to pry it open.

Two, chefs are eager to get out of their kitchens and see their friends. Camaraderie is critical to the hospitality business, so even if the financial burden of upholding connections with colleagues is heavy, many chefs are inclined to shoulder it.

That was true as far back as 2005, when hospitality scholars conducted a study of South Beach Wine & Food Festival exhibitors and chefs to better understand their motivations for participating. Two of the study's authors were affiliated with Florida International University, which is the festival's beneficiary.

Researchers were aware of the challenges that the festival dealt its culinary talent: "[Restaurants] were required to supply about 1,200 portions of food, staff the tables and provide their own serving equipment. ... While a prep kitchen and cold storage were provided at the Beach, none of the restaurant tables had electricity. In addition, fire codes prohibited propane burners or charcoal grills in the tent."

Elsewhere in the report, the researchers theorized that the difficulties contributed to group bonding. They wrote, "The extreme conditions at the Festival (no electricity, running water, etc.) make for a lot of cooperation."

They concluded, "Interestingly, the participants are motivated by the sheer fun of attending. As such, important rewards are to be found on the emotional dimension."

In other words, festivals could theoretically satisfy chefs by throwing wild parties with donated liquor.

Yet the world has changed immensely in the last fifteen years. What seemed like harmless fun then now looks more like a PR scandal in the making. And with the number of industry deaths related to substance abuse mounting, night after night of unbridled drinking doesn't have the allure it once did.

At the same time, festivals are reaping ever more revenue. So it's hardly surprising that a growing number of chefs are starting to question the longstanding festival model, and thinking about ways

Chefs know the rewards of so-called exposure are few.

to make the format fairer.

To be sure, there is no precise formula for what chefs receive in exchange for setting up a tasting tent table or partnering on a wine dinner. At the same festival, a Food Network host might get $10,000 for emceeing a cooking demo, while a food truck vendor would consider herself lucky to score a signed cookbook for her time. Each chef agreement is typically negotiated individually.

That said, longtime chefs have a pretty good idea of what festival participation costs. If a chef is a big enough name to anchor a seated dinner for 100, he or she can count on getting a small travel stipend, and perhaps a festival pass, which, as the fine print says, is non-transferable and has no cash value.

Let's start with travel costs. The $500 travel stipend will only cover about 50 percent of airfare for the chef and the two cooks needed to pull off a decent meal. Throw in rideshare fees, and the out-of-pocket tab comes to $1,150.

Once the crew's in town, they need a pair of hotel rooms. Call that $750. And if the chef wants to roll some culinary learning into the experience, they're going to eat at independently-owned restaurants. Let's say that's another $400.

Most likely, the chef isn't going to close his or her restaurant while out of town, since that could easily become a five-figure loss. That means someone needs to cover for the people at the festival. And the cooks on the road need to get paid too, so that's $800 in wages.

Chefs can cart ingredients from home or buy them on site, but either way, the basic calculation for a dinner that won't provoke ticket buyers into asking for their $225 back is $20 per plate. That works out to $2,000.

And finally, it's not just the restaurant meals that need to be prepared in the featured chef's absence. If he or she has a dog at home who needs to be walked, or a child who needs to be watched while a partner's at work, that's another purchase that the

"People should not be paying $75 for $300 worth of food and booze if we want to pay people equitably."

chef wouldn't have had to make if he or she just stayed home. Let's call it $500, bringing the total expense to $5,600.

To put it in restaurant terms, that's roughly the same sum a restaurant owner could spend on employing a dishwasher for 10 weeks. On the outskirts of St. Louis, $5,600 could cover one month's rent. In Little Rock, it could keep the electricity running all summer.

Another way chefs could use that same $5,600 is to spend it on an advertisement. Festival advocates might argue that's essentially what they're offering, except that the ad is live and interactive, which can't be said of a digital or print spread. But the crucial difference between a restaurant purchasing an ad in a city magazine and serving food at a city-backed festival is the latter can't exist without them. The chefs are the festival, yet they're receiving too little in exchange for their time and talent.

So who is getting paid? According to tax returns from festivals that accept public funding, lots of people. For example, the South Beach Wine & Food Festival in 2017 paid so much to a party rental company that organizers apparently didn't even notice they'd inadvertently sent along an extra $42,000, according to an internal audit conducted by Florida International University. (Ironically enough, although South Beach doesn't pay chefs as a rule, the festival in 2017 transferred nearly $1 million of its $9 million annual revenue to the university's hospitality school, which uses the funds in part to pay faculty salaries.)

Festivals' much-touted commitments to various causes are frequently cited by festival organizers when they ask chefs to work for nothing, ostensibly freeing up more money for donations. A prominent chef recently forwarded me an email sent by a festival affiliated with the Destin Charity Wine Auction, which has a $3 million operating budget.

Here's the deal spelled out by the invitation: The chef would get two six-foot tables with linens; a position beneath a tent or umbrella; and four working credentials for staff and official signage. Furthermore, the chef would be allowed to sell products, such as cookbooks or barbecue sauce. In exchange, the festival asked the chef to pay a $350 fee and to provide 1,200 free food samples and all of the "eco-friendly service ware" needed for ticketholders to enjoy them.

I want to pause here to note that a recycled fork bought in bulk costs approximately seven cents, or four times as much as an environmentally-unfriendly fork. In other words, the festival's determination to do right by the earth in this case would cost the chef $100.

Certainly, many of the chefs who received this solicitation believe in reducing waste, just as they believe in the missions of the charities supported by festival proceeds. Tax forms show that the Destin Charity Wine Auction every year donates hundreds of thousands of dollars to a number of agencies serving children in Northwest Florida.

The trouble is that many chefs already make generous contributions closer to home. They're not inclined to pay to travel to shore up a charity they don't know.

Yet chefs tell me that they get an earful about charity when they try to negotiate with food festivals. I have to take their word for it because very few food festivals want to address this issue on the record.

At the start of this project, I emailed surveys to twenty prominent food festivals from New York to Hawaii.

The ten-question survey was intended to establish a baseline for further discussion about compensation: It consisted primarily of what reporters would characterize as softball questions, such as "Can you offer specific examples of a chef capitalizing on the exposure offered by your festival?" and "Are chefs permitted to distribute promotional material for their restaurants at your festival?" All I wanted to know was what festivals were requesting and what they were offering in return.

Still, festivals did not respond well. Or, more accurately, they did not respond at all. Of the twenty festivals, two refused to complete the form; seven acknowledged receiving the survey, but didn't complete it, and another six didn't respond to repeated messages.

I was forced to consult public documents, which means there's still plenty I don't know about privately-run events. But fortunately, once a festival starts filling its coffers with city money, or obtains non-profit status to facilitate liquor donations, some of their spending decisions are on the record.

As for chefs, they've been more forthcoming. The South is small, so soon after I began work on this assignment, I heard from more than a dozen chefs, veterans of the food festival circuit, who wanted to share their stories.

Then, after the *Los Angeles Times* published a story based on this reporting, which was funded by SFA, food editor Peter Meehan and I moderated a chef conversation about the subject.

What emerged from that event is that chefs feel pretty glum about this whole situation (although perhaps not as glum as publicists, who may have sent the majority of appreciative messages I received after the story appeared: They clearly feel stuck in their role of trying not to offend festival leaders while at the same time looking out for their clients).

Generally, the Los Angeles chefs said, they're not opposed to the highly exclusive festivals that amount to chef vacations. Will Guidara, formerly of Eleven Madison Park, spoke admiringly of Eric Ripert's festival in the Cayman Islands. Specifically, he said, "It is a free flight, and you're on the beach. Like, that's pretty sick." And they don't have a problem with grassroots festivals that are site-specific and don't involve much money changing hands.

But that's not how the culinary extravaganzas we've talked about today operate, and the Los Angeles chefs weren't quite sure how to deal with them. To be clear, they don't want them to disappear forever. They think there's value in the format and rejected my suggestion that chefs could pay the same amount of money to get together and have fun outside of the public eye. Yet they're increasingly persuaded that the current business model is broken beyond repair.

Zach Brooks of Smorgasburg LA said, "If it is too good to be true for the customer, then it is too good to be true, period. People should not be paying $75 to eat $300 worth of food and booze if we want to pay people equitably. [Someone with a festival said] like, 'It's really hard. We don't make a lot of money.' And it's like, yeah, you don't make a lot of money because your business model sucks, and you're still taking advantage of all these people and delivering an OK experience to the public. So you don't deserve to run a food festival."

Will Guidara immediately paraphrased it: "So your advice is be smarter and less greedy?"

A few of the chefs had come up with impressive ways to spend as little money as possible on food festivals: Jon Yao of Kato, for example, felt obliged to participate in a certain festival, so he arranged to get a huge amount of caviar donated, which he then doled out as caviar bumps. No staff, no service ware: Just him putting free product on people's hands.

It's brilliant, but it's not the answer. If organizers and festivalgoers want to take on this serious labor problem, they're going to have to address their dangerous addiction to luxury.

And with that, I want to open up the discussion. I don't have a solution, in part because I still don't have all of the behind-the-scenes details. Since a version of this story was published last fall, I have heard from one festival organizer. That shocked me. It suggests the system really is rotten when not one festival founder, director, board member, or volunteer wants to stick up for their standard compensation scheme. So does that mean they're holed up in executive sessions, secretly crafting new strategies to improve the situation? Or are they hoping this topic will just go away? I don't know. But we can work to prevent the latter. Let's talk. If you want to talk about food festival economics and chef compensation, email me at hraskin@postandcourier.com.

Hanna Raskin is the food editor and chief critic of The Post and Courier *in Charleston, SC. She also serves as president of the Association of Food Journalists.*

WE THE PEOPLE ARE LARGER THAN WE USED TO BE

THAT INCLUDES ME AND A WHOLE NATION OF NOW-SEDENTARY WORKERS.

BY TOMMY TOMLINSON

I WAS BORN IN 1964 TO A MAN and a woman who worked their whole lives with their backs and their hands.

My folks, L.M. and Virginia Tomlinson, grew up a few counties apart in south Georgia during the Depression. Their families were sharecroppers, picking cotton in fields that belonged to wealthier men. My mom quit school in the fourth grade and my dad quit in the sixth. They were full-time farm workers from the time they were nine or ten years old. They picked the cotton bolls from the pods that bit into their fingers. They dragged the ever-heavier sacks down the rows. They bent over all day, the sun beating down on top of them, turning them into rednecks—not by choice, or by culture, but by the brutal facts of their work.

They both got out of the fields as fast as they could. My dad spent a little time in the Army, came back and worked as a logger for a dollar a day, then got a job at an appliance repair shop, where he learned how to fix bigger and bigger machines. My mom took care of her mom, worked a bunch of odd jobs, got in and out of a bad marriage. Eventually they both found jobs at a seafood plant called SeaPak on St. Simons Island, Georgia. That's where they met. When

they got married in 1963, my dad had a cast on his left hand from getting it mangled in one of the machines he worked on. They bought a house with a mortgage of fifty dollars a month, and not long after they had me.

In a picture from the early '70s, my daddy is holding a plate of catfish. We caught thousands of those fish out of the Altamaha River when I was growing up. If you came to our house on a Saturday night back then, more than likely you were getting fed fried fish, french fries, hushpuppies, slaw, sweet tea, and banana pudding. We also caught crabs with chicken necks and threw cast nets for shrimp. Years later, when I came home and told my mama that shrimp and grits was going for twenty dollars a plate in Charleston, she refused to believe it. For us, shrimp and grits is what we ate if there was nothing else left in the house.

My mama and daddy were average-sized people. He stayed right around 175 pounds his whole adult life. I am slightly different. Five years ago, when I started working on my book, I weighed in at 460. Over the years, I piled on the fast food and pizza and beer in a way my folks never did. But growing up, I ate the same Southern food they did, and I kept getting bigger while they stayed the same.

What I want to talk about is why that food landed on me in a way that it didn't on them. I think it has a lot to do with why America is getting bigger as a whole—depending on how you measure it, up to 40 percent of the people in this country qualify as medically obese.

A big part of that, I think, is the shift over generations from blue-collar work to white-collar work. In short: Workers in this country used to spend the day on their feet. Now most of us spend it sitting on our asses. And as a result, we the people are a lot larger than we used to be.

THE US BUREAU OF LABOR Statistics measures work in categories that lump together people who move around for work and people who don't. For example, the service category includes places like hotels. In a hotel, you've got people sitting at desks taking reservations, and you've got people on their feet all day cleaning rooms and washing sheets. So any measure of desk work versus muscle work is bound to be imprecise.

But one standard measurement is to look at what they call goods-producing jobs—those that involve something tangible getting made. The government groups those kinds of jobs into four main categories: agriculture, manufacturing, construction, and mining.

A lot of agricultural labor has been

WORKERS IN THIS COUNTRY USED TO SPEND THE DAY ON THEIR FEET. NOW MOST OF US SPEND IT SITTING ON OUR ASSES.

Illustration by Delphine Lee

consolidated into factory farms that use machines to do what people used to. And manufacturing jobs have been lost to automation or shipped overseas. But let me illustrate just how profound a change it's been.

Let's go back two generations, to 1950. My dad would have been working for a while by then and my mom would've been just entering the work force. That year, those goods-producing jobs—blue-collar work—made up 41 percent of all the jobs in the United States.

Now fast-forward to 1986, when I got out of college and started working in a desk job as a newspaper reporter. By that year, the percentage of goods-producing jobs nationwide was down to 25 percent.

And today, those goods-producing jobs are down to less than 15 percent. So when my mom and dad were young working people, about two out of every five Americans did physical labor. Now it's about one in seven.

Here's a second set of numbers.

By the time my parents were out in the workforce, around 1960, the average American man weighed 166 pounds, and the average American woman came in at 140.

In the mid-1980s, the average American man weighed 181 or fifteen pounds heavier. The average American woman was up thirteen pounds, to 153.

Currently, the average American man weighs in at 198, and the average American woman is 171.

So men are thirty-two pounds heavier on average than we were two generations ago, and women are thirty-one pounds heavier. The good news is, we're also an inch or so taller. But we're getting wide a lot faster than we're getting high.

Why? Fast food and junk food are more available and cheaper than they've ever been before. They are advertised relentlessly. And more people than ever live in places where it's hard to find fresh fruits and vegetables.

But we have to remember that our bodies are not just a reflection of what we eat, but a reflection of how we live when we're not at the table. And I'd argue that this fundamental shift in how we spend our work days—basically, from active work to passive work—has contributed to that change as much as anything. And I know this to be true in my own family.

My grandmother had a stroke when my mom was twelve years old. From then on, my mom was in charge of the household for her mom and the five other remaining kids. Every morning she got up and made three dozen biscuits with white gravy—basically, flour and bacon grease. Those seven people would eat every one of those biscuits—five or six apiece. Then, before she went back in the field, she'd start a big pot of black-eyed peas or lima beans. That would be lunch and supper, augmented by two or three skillets of cornbread per meal. On better days, they'd have a hunk of ham or some fried chicken.

The author's parents, Virginia and L.M. Tomlinson, worked hard—labor that eventually paid off in tables packed with Southern stapes.

Photograph courtesy of Tommy Tomlinson

OUR BODIES ARE NOT JUST A REFLECTION OF WHAT WE EAT, BUT A REFLECTION OF HOW WE LIVE WHEN WE'RE NOT AT THE TABLE.

But biscuits and beans was their regular sustenance, day after day after day.

I added it up one day and figured that eight or ten biscuits and hunks of cornbread, a few tablespoons of gravy, plus three cups of blackeyed peas or limas, comes to about 4,500 calories—roughly double the recommended intake for an average person now. The food was cheap and monotonous, but it was full of carbs and protein. They needed every last calorie to survive fifteen-hour days bent over a cotton patch in the Georgia summer.

As a result, everybody in my family from my mom and dad on back were as lean and strong as deer. The only one I ever saw with a potbelly was my Uncle Junior, who got into the exterminating business and did well enough that he could pay other people to crawl under houses. Otherwise, if you lined up my mom and dad and their brothers and sisters and cousins, it would look like the starting line of a triathlon. None of them had ever been to a gym. Their lives were a gym. Nothing you could do at the YMCA could ever replicate the workout they went through every damn day.

As my parents' generation moved off the farm, and mostly out of poverty, supper improved greatly. They sampled some modern foods. I barely remember a day growing up when our refrigerator did not contain a glass bowl full of Jell-O. But the core of what they ate, and eventually what I ate, was what we think of as traditional Southern food.

Most of the time, the center of the table was a platter of fried chicken piled so high it would topple if you pulled out the wrong leg. There'd be pork chops, turkey and dressing, beef stew, maybe venison if it was hunting season. Then the white food group: mashed potatoes, potato salad, deviled eggs, rice with brown gravy. Biscuits and cornbread shining with butter. And then the vegetables: crowder peas and Kentucky Wonder pole beans, crookneck squash and fried okra, turnip greens in salty potlikker, sliced tomatoes picked five minutes ago.

This paragraph is as close as I will ever come to writing porn.

But without any of us paying much attention, the shift in the way we worked had already started. My brother, who's fourteen years older than me, was the first in my family to go to college; he eventually became an insurance agent. My sister became a social worker. I still had cousins who ended up at the pulp mill or the chemical plant. But my people were slowly transforming from farmers and factory workers to teachers and salespeople, and even a writer.

At four years old, I was already the beneficiary of a few of those family reunions. That kid was not about to run a triathlon.

Back then, when my dad would finish

his shift at SeaPak, he'd stop by the canteen on the way out the door and buy a carton of chocolate milk and a pack of peanut butter crackers. He'd bring them home to me every night, like a sacrament. I was too young to remember him doing it. As my mom and dad told the story over the years, I thought of the milk and crackers as a treat, a nightly gift from a man who spoke with his actions more than his words.

But lately I've also come to think of it as my dad's insurance policy. He knew what it was like to go hungry. And he wanted to make sure that was something his son would never know.

By then, those big meals we were eating carried a double meaning.

The Southern supper table was, for most of my family's history, nothing more than a gas station—where they fueled up for the next shift of the backbreaking work they had to do to hold things together.

But as the years went by, that food also has also become a symbol of what all those working people overcame. Now, it serves as a love offering from our laboring past to the 9-to-5 present where most of us live.

Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar. But in my house, a piece of chicken was rarely just a piece of chicken.

That is delicate territory, emotionally and physically. My parents' bodies operated in a fundamentally different way than mine. They worked so hard for so long that their metabolism revved like a cheetah's. Mine is more like a manatee. And so when we ate those big meals, my family could shed those calories, but they stuck to me. And I became hooked on food in a way they didn't. As I got older, I augmented those meals with Big Macs, pizza, beer, and Little Debbies by the box.

One of the things I've found out through research and writing is that something down deep in our DNA thinks we're still cave people. If you're overweight like me, and you lose a lot of weight really fast, it sets off alarms at the cellular level. Your body thinks you're wasting away. So it slows your metabolism down and increases your appetite, encouraging you to eat something because winter is coming. That leads to a brutal paradox: The more weight you've gained, the harder your body fights you when you try to lose it.

THE SOUTHERN SUPPER TABLE

WAS, FOR MOST OF MY FAMILY'S HISTORY, NOTHING MORE THAN A GAS STATION—WHERE THEY FUELED UP FOR THE NEXT SHIFT OF THE BACKBREAKING WORK THEY HAD TO DO TO HOLD THINGS TOGETHER.

The author at age four, showing signs of his family's changes in fortune, work, and weight.

Photograph courtesy of Tommy Tomlinson

These days, if you lined up my family for a photo, we wouldn't look like the starting line of a triathlon. Maybe the starting line of a hot-dog-eating contest. The soft work my generation does, combined with those rich meals, brings its own set of consequences.

My sister died at sixty-three from an infection brought on by her chronic weight problems. At her funeral, I remember looking around at all the people I knew—all our family and friends—and realizing that they'd be back soon for my funeral if I didn't do something soon.

So I have spent the past few years on a slow and steady program to drop a little weight every month, enough to feel better and be healthier, but not enough to set off those alarm bells in my DNA. I've learned to take smaller portions, or save up for special meals, or just walk away. That's not always easy, especially when your family gathers, and your aunt has made the special mac and cheese she makes just once a year, and it is so fucking good.

This body I carry around is the accumulation of thousands of bad decisions over my fifty-five years. But it is also, in some strange way, a symbol of victory. I don't want to be fat, and I am working hard so that one day I won't be fat anymore.

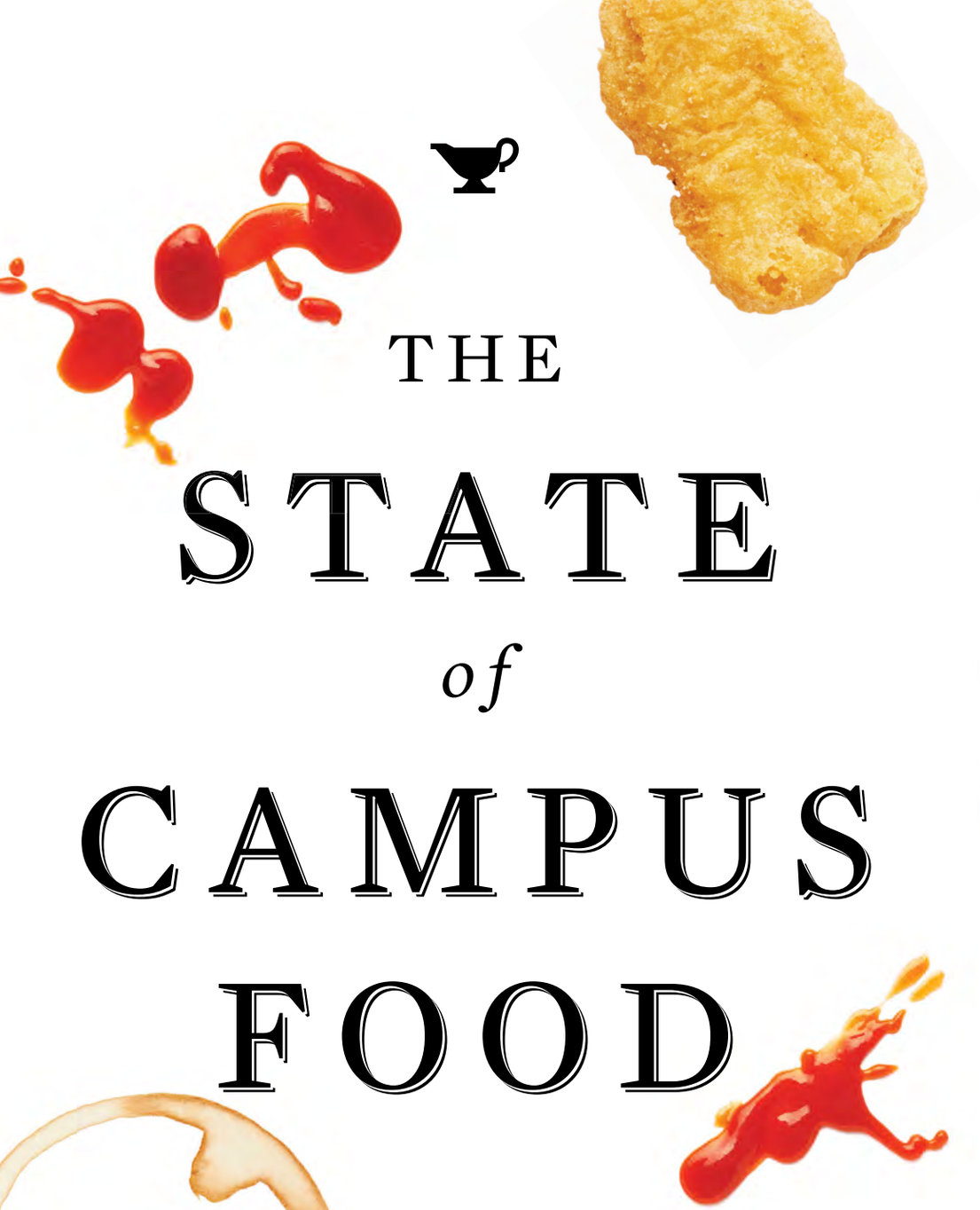
But nobody in my family before me had the luxury to choose. They worked so hard to survive—but also to make sure we wouldn't have to work as hard as they did. And they succeeded. My life is easier, by any measure, than the life my parents had to live. No matter how high I climb, I will never have to travel as far as they did to make it out of the dust of the cotton fields.

My mother, until her dying day, would hide her eyes every time we passed a cotton patch. Every once in a while, my dad would crave biscuits and syrup for supper, and my mom would make a pan of biscuits, because she loved him. But after my dad died, she announced that she was done making biscuits. She had made enough for one life.

Three years ago, I gave up fast food for Lent. Since then, I haven't been in a McDonald's or Burger King or any of those places, except to use the bathroom. The last fast-food meal I had was with my mom. I had taken her to the doctor's office and on the way back she was hungry. She wanted a biscuit. So we went to Hardee's and that's what we got. The biscuit she ate landed in her body differently than mine did. It probably also landed in her mind in a different way. That biscuit, and thousands of others like them, meant survival for her. Avoiding that biscuit, and thousands of others like them, has meant survival for me.

Tommy Tomlinson is author of The Elephant in the Room: One Fat Man's Quest to Get Smaller in a Growing America.

THE STATE of CAMPUS FOOD



When Food Service Means Food Stamps p. 44

Prices of Meal Plans Soar at Mississippi Universities p. 49

At Auburn, 20 Percent of Campus Food Must Be Local p. 54

THE STATE of CAMPUS FOOD

When Food Service Means Food Stamps

A job feeding college students means few benefits for contract laborers.

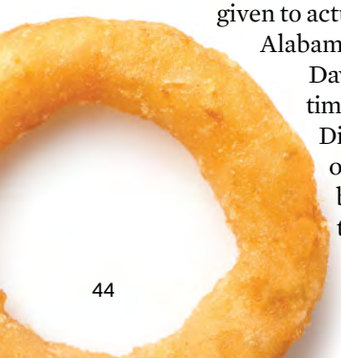
by Amy Yurkanin

TACARRA DAVIS SPENT SIX YEARS behind the serving lines of the University of Alabama's largest dining halls.

"I pretty much did everything," Davis said. "Training, prepping, cooking, serving."

She chopped and cooked, dishing and serving students and staff at Alabama's largest university. She never ran late, rarely missed shifts and generally made herself a fixture, even as the rest of the staff turned over as regularly as a chicken on a spit.

That six years of labor was more than enough time to earn a bachelor's degree. But as even as she was a fixture in the dining hall, Davis was an outsourced and seasonal employee. She didn't make a living wage or earn the tuition benefits given to actual University of Alabama employees.



Davis started part-time in 2013 at Bama Dining, a subsidiary of Philadelphia-based food contractor Aramark. It's one of the largest food service contractors in the world, employing 215,000 people and providing dining services on more than 400 US college and university campuses. The dining powerhouse is one of several companies operating industrial kitchens across the country, a multibillion-dollar business powered by the labor of low-wage workers.

After four years, she went full-time—with a catch. Her employment ended every summer, when she subsisted on food stamps, unemployment, and borrowed money. Vacation for students meant desperation for Davis. She thought she would be working for the University of Alabama when she applied for the Bama Dining job. She had worked in food service before but expected more from a campus position.

"Since it was the University of Alabama, you expect it to pay enough for taking care of all those kids on campus," Davis said.

It wasn't until she arrived at orientation that she learned Aramark would be her employer. That set Davis apart from other university employees who tended the grounds, cleaned the floors, and protected the buildings. Davis and her coworkers worked through holidays and tornado scares that closed classes and other university functions.

"When there's severe weather, the college shuts down, schools can shut down, but we always have this service available here for the students," said Kristina Patridge, director of university dining services. "Bama Dining—they show up."

On campus, these workers miss out on one of the most important benefits colleges have to offer: free University of Alabama classes. While regular employees enjoy generous tuition discounts that enable them or their family members to get degrees and climb the economic ladder, Davis did not. It was just one of many stark differences she noticed between the status of food service workers and university employees.

"We were working for the university on the campus, but there was a big difference," Davis said. Another difference: Davis and her fellow Aramark employees worked through holidays and weather scares. But unlike classes, meals never got canceled.

Food service isn't the only department affected by outsourcing. At Alabama A&M University, Aramark contractors maintain some facilities. University of Alabama in Huntsville uses outside companies to transport students. Troy University recently bid out some of its public relations work. And nearly all colleges and universities use adjunct faculty paid by the class in addition to regular, full-time professors.

Universities increasingly outsource—an approach pioneered by corporations that has spread to education and the public sector. Cornell University professor Rosemary Batt has studied how the model affects workers in fast food franchises and call centers.

"The empirical evidence shows that there's a substantial difference between the wages and working conditions of people in the outsourced entity of the contract firm," Batt said.

Not far from the dining hall where Tacarra Davis spent her days, Terry Poole worked as a security guard for the University of Alabama, patrolling parking lots and checking dorms for trouble. He took the job not for its $26,000 a year salary, but for the tuition discounts he's using to complete a degree in aerospace engineering.

"I was a bouncer downtown for a long time, and one of the other bouncers was also a security guard at Alabama, and he was telling me about the benefits," Poole said. "So he asked me if I wanted to get on there so I did, specifically for the education benefits."

"When there's severe weather, the college shuts down, schools can shut down, but we always have [dining] service available here for the students."

Poole started in January 2016. In addition to the tuition discount, he received a standard package of state employee benefits, including paid sick leave, health insurance, and a pension. Then there were the not-so-standard benefits.

"There's a few other perks," Poole said. "A lot of the businesses around town give employees discounts."

Davis, on the other hand, discovered that working for Aramark came with a lot of unanticipated costs. Like all employees,

When Tacarra Davis went full-time, she became eligible for health insurance and a 401(k) through contractor Aramark but couldn't afford premiums or contributions.

she had to pay for on-campus parking. Unlike regular employees, she couldn't have the cost automatically deducted from her paycheck and had to make a special trip to the parking office. At one point, she racked up $400 in parking fines when she couldn't afford the fees.

Aramark's raises, when she received them, were smaller than she expected. When Davis went full-time, she became eligible for health insurance and a 401(k) through Aramark but couldn't afford premiums or contributions.

Davis earned a little more than $10 an hour when she quit, which worked out to about $13,000 a year. Food and meal discounts helped a bit with her bottom line, but Davis still struggled to stay afloat between paychecks. The low wage prevented her from building up savings.

"I spent six years there, and I didn't accomplish anything," Davis said.

Meanwhile, Poole embraced a double life—full-time employee by night and student by day. It was his second go at college, an opportunity he didn't want to waste.

His first college try ended quickly when he became overwhelmed by the coursework. Poole dropped out and spent several years installing concrete floors in retail outlets. He made good money until the industry changed and the company went out of business. His income dropped, and he seized the university job as a path to better economic security.

"I've never been on an airplane a day in my life, and people always ask, 'Well, how are you going to build airplanes if you've never been on one?'" Poole said. "Well, people build spaceships, and I promise you they've never been on one of those either. Honestly, at the end of the day, aerospace engineering is one of the highest paying jobs you can get with a bachelor's degree. That's why I did it."

According to Payscale.com, a website that tracks industry pay, entry-level aerospace engineers can earn an average of $68,000 annually. Six-figure salaries aren't uncommon.

Poole said he paid about $2,500 this semester for thirteen hours of engineering classes, and he estimates his total bill will range between $15,000 to $18,000 when he completes his degree in 2021.

"There was one semester my books cost more than my tuition," Poole said. "I always look at everything in red and black, and at the end of the day, it's saving me $50,000 to $60,000 to get my degree."

Poole used his natural ability with numbers to maximize every hour, paycheck, and benefit. Security guards at the University of Alabama work twelve-hour shifts, and Poole started on the night shift. He worked from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. and reported to class at 8 a.m. Two classes every day—plus labs and homework—practically eliminated any downtime.

"I think I averaged about eight to fourteen hours of sleep a week," he said. "It was not easy."

Last year Poole switched to days, which has been easier on his sleep schedule, but tougher in terms of class schedule. The university gives employees three hours leave a week for school. Poole squeezes classes into his lunch and supplemental breaks. He burns an hour and fifteen minutes of annual leave every week for lectures.

Changes in his work schedule have disrupted this plan. At one point, the security guard ran out of leave and missed several classes. That semester, he earned two As, one B and a D in a required course he had to retake over the summer.

Summer is a quiet time at the university, and the season with the most generous education benefits. Employees can take two free classes during the lull.

That generosity does not extend to Aramark, which lays off a significant part of its workforce every summer. Some years, Davis qualified for unemployment benefits of about $100 a week, and in others, she picked up hours during camp season. Usually she just went unpaid for three months.

"At the time I was receiving food stamps," Davis said. "So basically, I just lived off food stamps and borrowing money."

Seasonal workers reduce costs for contractors, Batt said.

"Colleges used to employ food and service workers directly," Batt said. "In the past couple of decades, in order to cut costs, universities have outsourced their dietary services to contractors. And the contracts are designed to reduce costs. So the food-service contractors are always looking for ways to cut costs. So they cut the hours they are willing to provide services."

That often translates to shorter hours for dining halls and closure during holiday breaks, she said.

"This also creates unstable seasonal work for the workers," Batt said.

Aramark has operated dining services at the University of Alabama since 1996, when it took over from another contractor. The company provides dining services at several Southern schools, including Auburn University, the University of South Alabama, the University of Mississippi and Mississippi State.

The business relationship benefits both parties. Under the terms of the contract, Aramark must pay the university at least $9.5 million in commissions for the 2019-2020 school year. In return, Aramark receives a captive market, thousands of students required to purchase meal plans that cost roughly $2,000 a semester.

The partnership created controversy in the past. Students sued Auburn University and two University of Alabama campuses (Huntsville and Birmingham) in 2010 in an attempt to block mandatory dining fees. Judges dismissed the case, and students remain obligated to buy more than $300 in Dining Dollars every year, which can be spent on campus and at some off-campus locations. Unlike meal plans, which are only required for freshmen, all students must participate in Dining Dollars.

Off-campus restaurants have balked at the program's fees, which require them to pay Aramark in order to compete for business.

Food service consultant Tom Mac Dermott said the cost of feeding students has increased in recent years as students demand healthier food with more variety. Using contractors allows universities to

focus on education and research while specialists handle the cooking and serving. Many universities struggled to provide dining services without the expertise and bulk buying power companies like Aramark provide. He estimated 70 percent of colleges and universities use contractors to provide food and upgrade facilities.

"There's no trend toward going back to self-operated food service," Mac Dermott said.

The number of universities using outside companies has grown in recent years.

Some schools have bucked the trend. University of Georgia operates its own dining services. Yale University dropped contractors and took over its dining operations more than a decade ago. More recently, Kennesaw State University in Georgia ended its contract with Sodexo and began preparing its own food.

Most colleges and universities have found that outsourcing saves money on wages and benefits, Mac Dermott said.

"In addition to wages, the burden of providing benefits would fall on the contractor," he said.

Economist Semoon Chang of the Gulf Coast Center for Impact Studies said using contractors has many benefits and doesn't necessarily harm workers who can earn more at Aramark than other food service jobs.

"Outsourcing is an effective way of lowering costs for many organizations," Chang said. "Benefits include no payments of fringe benefits such as retirement, Social Security, insurance, et cetera; no payment when business is slow, such as summertime for educational institutions; no worry about possible unionization of workers; flexibility in changing suppliers if services are not good."

Patridge said the University of Alabama has only six staff members in dining services. Aramark employs more than 500. The company even staffs on-campus branches of chains such as Starbucks and Raising Cane's. The university monitors the company's compliance with the contract and the quality of the food. A student committee makes recommendations aimed at improving the variety and quality of food.

But the university doesn't require minimum wages or benefits for workers, Patridge said.

"They simply work as an independent contractor on campus," she said.

Poole grew up in Duncanville, in rural Tuscaloosa County. When his father's draft number came up, his mother dropped out of high school to support their young family.

"I grew up in a family where it was more important to get a job and work hard than it was to get an education," Poole said.

That work ethic, combined with access to a university education, could open doors to a brighter future. Even if his job ends, he plans to complete his degree.

Aramark has introduced an education benefit for qualifying employees, starting in 2020. The company will pay tuition for employees without college degrees accepted to an Arizona State University online program. Only employees will be eligible—not their children.

It came too late for Davis, who left her Aramark job in May and took a position with an auto parts manufacturer. It offers better pay, benefits, and year-round work.

"The older you get, the more you realize this is not for me," Davis said. "I found something better. I can have money built up, and I can just see a big difference. I'm so glad to be off that campus."

Amy Yurkanin is an investigative reporter at AL.com. These articles are part of an SFA partnership with with AL.com, the Montgomery Advertiser, Mississippi Today, *and the* Clarion Ledger *to shed light on labor practices at area universities.*

Prices of Meal Plans Soar at Mississippi Universities

Contractor Aramark uses the profits to expand campus facilities.

by Aallyah Wright and Luke Ramseth

AT $2,000 A SEMESTER FOR A meal plan, Mississippi State University students pay twice what they did about a decade ago for food. Ole Miss dining prices have similarly skyrocketed, up $500 in five years.

Narika Glasper, a recent Ole Miss graduate, recalled the sticker shock. Her scholarships covered housing and tuition, but not food. The price of an "unlimited" meal plan was out of the question, so she settled for a cheaper one that covered fifty meals a semester. Then she learned her unused meal "swipes" didn't roll over.

"I was mad because that's money that was wasted," said Glasper, 22. "I had to pay upfront for that and I didn't use it, so that's money that just went to [Ole Miss food contractor, Aramark]."

Glasper isn't alone in her frustration. Rising meal plan prices at Ole Miss and Mississippi State mirror hikes at colleges around the country, and they contribute to the increasing cost of a college education. A big reason for the higher costs? Students are paying for more than just food.

MSU and Ole Miss deliver increasing student meal plan revenue to their dining contractor, Aramark. Some students are required to pay for meal plans. In return, the schools receive millions of dollars in commissions and bonuses, which they often use to upgrade or build new facilities and add new dining options, according to dining contracts obtained by the *Clarion Ledger* and *Mississippi Today*.

"Food service on college campuses is one of the biggest revenue streams for colleges," said Marissa Meyers, researcher with the Hope Center, an organization focused on college costs.

Food usually makes up the "board" part of room and board costs at colleges. Nationwide, college students now pay on average more than $4,600 a year for board costs, with Mississippi at about $3,800 for public universities, according to US Department of Education data.

This means students are paying

substantially more per meal than they would to cook and eat on their own, according to US Bureau of Labor statistics and *The Hechinger Report*. In 2017, the education-focused news outlet reported that colleges and universities nationwide charged on average $18.75 a day for a three-meal dining contract. Eating at home ran less than $11.

HOW DO DINING CONTRACTS WORK?

Tom Mac Dermott, a dining consultant for colleges, said schools often lost money on their in-house food operations, so they gradually turned to one of three multinational corporations—Aramark, Sodexo, and Compass Group—to run their dining halls, restaurants, and catering.

Mississippi State's operation was losing money when officials decided to switch to Aramark in 2007, said Regina Hyatt, vice president of student affairs, adding that administrators also hoped to offer more quality food options. Ole Miss, too, was looking to move from its cafeteria-style, assembly-line dining when it hired Aramark in 1996.

But contractors eventually ran out of "ways to distinguish themselves on the service side" when competing for university contracts, Mac Dermott said. So they began offering more cash to universities in the form of commissions and bonuses.

"Once colleges and universities understood that money was available, they latched onto it," he said.

For example, Aramark paid MSU a $5 million bonus for signing a ten-year contract, and later doled out as much as $675,000 a year for unrestricted use, according to its contract. These perks came alongside at least an annual 12 percent commission for MSU. The university agreed to deliver a set number of meal plans to Aramark in any given year, and if it didn't reach the minimum, it would pay Aramark the difference.

Ole Miss, meanwhile, received a nearly $8 million bonus in 2014-2015 for food facility upgrades, including a "campus dining refresh." In the past five years alone, Ole Miss received about $10 million in commissions and delivered Aramark a little more than $117 million worth of meal plan patrons, cash operations, and catering, according to a chart provided by the university.

The cost of these bonuses and commissions are passed on to students, Mac Dermott said. Contractors have to make a profit and "there's no other place to get it back," other than charging students higher prices.

Even though buying a meal plan "is much, much more expensive" than cooking at home, Meyers said there are no easy solutions for reducing meal plan costs under the current system. Dining contractors already buy as little food as possible by assuming students won't use all their meal swipes in a given week, she said.

"The things that students ask for don't cost money," Mac Dermott said of meal options. "They're looking for healthier food, they're looking for changes in meal plans. It's the university administration that feels it must have an upgraded dining hall as part of its competitive situation."

HAS IT PAID OFF WITH BETTER CAMPUS FOOD OPTIONS?

The dining experience at both campuses transformed under Aramark as student meal prices increased.

Ole Miss added a bevy of branded restaurants and upscale dining hall options, including a "food-court environment" where managers can "interchange menu concepts very easily," said Scott Schornhorst, Aramark food service director for the university.

It now has more than twenty dining locations with national brands such as Starbucks and Chick-fil-A. There are vegan and vegetarian options, and stations for students with gluten sensitivities. The newly-renovated student union opened this spring.

MSU followed a similar trajectory. In 2007, a university vice president pledged the move to Aramark would "provide better quality and service throughout campus."

To achieve this goal, the school reopened a student union with chain restaurants. It renovated Perry Cafeteria, turning it into a "marketplace-style venue." The university later announced a new $10 million Aramark-branded dining hall, featuring "exhibition cooking stations" and "framed views of the stadium and the campus beyond."

"Students are sophisticated in their expectations for their food options," said Hyatt, the MSU student affairs official. "They expect to have choices, the kind of food that they're going to have access to (at home)."

Ten years ago, there were no allergen-free stations in the dining hall, she said, but "we've adjusted" to student demand. Meeting student expectations "means there's going to be a cost associated with it."

At MSU, that cost has risen from $1,000 a semester for the 2007 school year, when Aramark took over, to $2,019 for the "Ultimate" plan today, in which all freshmen on-campus students are automatically enrolled. This far outpaces the cumulative rate of inflation for this period of less than 25 percent, according

Contractors have to make a profit and "there's no other place to get it back," other than charging students higher prices, said consultant Tom Mac Dermott.

to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Hyatt said the officials aren't using the rising prices to "pad the pocket of the institution." She said much of the commissions from Aramark are pumped back into a general scholarship fund and other funds that improve the campus.

At Ole Miss, on-campus freshmen are also automatically enrolled in the $1,985 "Rebel Unlimited Plus 1" plan. The university has used money generated by its Aramark contract "to reinvest in the facilities and to fund day-to-day operations that are necessary for the university to handle its parts of the agreement," said Kathy Tidwell, director of contractual services and licensing.

Other Aramark-managed universities report similar prices: The top plan at the University of Southern Mississippi costs $2,050. At the University of Alabama, the most expensive plan runs nearly $2,000, up by $600 since 2012.

Other contractors have followed a similar path to grow student food plan revenues. In 2013, SodexoMAGIC took over Jackson State University's dining halls. Back then, the top meal plan ran students $1,447. By this school year, the same plan had increased to $1,979.

Some universities have in recent years begun charging nearly all students for meals — whether they need them or not. As of this year, Ole Miss charges almost all undergraduates $250 in "Flex Dollars" each semester.

And Alabama mandates undergraduates pay $350 for a similar "Dining Dollars" food plan. Prices for these mandatory plans are also rising: Alabama's contract with Aramark stipulates the university must seek approval from state officials to hike its Dining Dollars price tag by $25 every few years.

WITH HIGHER PRICES, HOW ARE CAMPUSES DEALING WITH STUDENT HUNGER?

Rachel Sumekh is founder and CEO of Swipe Out Hunger, an organization addressing food insecurity on college campuses. The group works with eighty-six universities across the country, including the University of Southern Mississippi, allowing students with extra meal swipes to donate them to hungry peers.

The college affordability crisis, Sumekh said, has mostly to do with the increasing cost of living expenses including costly meal plans—not tuition prices.

Financial aid such as Pell Grants doesn't always stretch far enough to cover all of a student's living expenses. So instead of taking out a loan, she said, students simply skip buying a pricey meal plan.

Universities, Sumekh said, should be better about using grant and scholarship data to identify students who may be hungry—and providing resources so they can eat in the dining halls alongside their peers. Many universities have opened food pantries to help hungry students. But she said that's not sufficient.

Universities and their contractors are becoming more aware of food insecurity, however, through groups like Swipe Out Hunger and others. MSU has a similar swipe donation program through Aramark, Hyatt said.

In addition, the campus operates Maroon Meals, where students are alerted on their phones when extra free food is available from events around campus. Officials also are working to open a food pantry, she said.

Tyshean Grant, a 2016 Ole Miss graduate, was one of the students who could not afford to pay for a full-priced meal plan her freshman year. So, she said she had to use Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits to offset the costs of buying food off campus.

"I see what they're trying to do with creating a (better meal plan), like combo-type options," Grant said. "But I also think the options should be affordable."

LOW PAY, LONG HOURS FOR CAMPUS FOOD EMPLOYEES

The shift to contractors has not generally improved conditions for on-campus food service employees, many of whom are also students. Mac Dermott said contractors generally hire food service employees at the lowest possible rate, with some fringe benefits. Most only receive about forty weeks of pay in a year due to the shortened college calendar. He said unions have made few inroads.

Universities can negotiate solid terms for their former employees under a new contractor. When Aramark took over at MSU in 2007, for example, employees received a 5 percent pay increase, kept certain benefits, and were guaranteed employment for at least a year, according to its contract.

But while several former Aramark employees praised the company's benefits package, they expressed concerns about the consistent layoffs, unpredictable work hours and intense workload.

Joshua Taylor, 37, worked as a cook for Ole Miss athletics for years before departing earlier this year. He said he worked at least nine hours a day for $17 an hour with benefits. But the job became too much of a burden, he said, once many of his coworkers were laid off.

"They scaled our entire operation in half and let go of half of my coworkers, and I was left there," he said. Eventually, it was "ten people doing the job of about thirty. I'm 37. I'm not interested in doing the work of three people."

Brittiney Massey, 30, echoed Taylor's sentiments. She said layoffs that occur during summer and winter breaks impact employees negatively.

"Just because layoffs happen doesn't mean [our] expenses were suspended for that time," Massey said.

Massey, hired in 2012, worked her way to a supervisor position in the banquet department. During her tenure, she felt underpaid and that coworkers were overlooked for promotions. She left in 2017.

"I was the banquet supervisor and I was getting paid $12 an hour, but my hours would go from twelve- to sixteen-hour days," she said.

Available positions are posted online and promotions are based on "merit and skill," said Scornhorst, food service director at Ole Miss, and "anyone can apply." He recognized winter and summer layoffs pose challenges and as a result, the company loses employees. But they are welcome to come back on the "predetermined day," he added.

"It's a pause in the system, not a hard shutoff," he said. "We do run into issues with retention, when locations close up for two months at a time. ... Folks need to make money in those off times."

Aallyah Wright covers education and local government for Mississippi Today. *She is also the co-founder of the Mississippi Delta Public Newsroom. Luke Ramseth reports on politics, health, and local government for the* Clarion Ledger.

THE STATE of CAMPUS FOOD

AT AUBURN, 20 PERCENT OF CAMPUS FOOD MUST BE LOCAL

STUDENTS PUSHED FOR CHANGE.

by Melissa Brown

ON AN AVERAGE DAY, THE NILE tilapia travels less than five miles from its watery home to an Auburn University dining tray.

"These are very healthy fish," said Auburn University School of Fisheries, Aquaculture and Aquatic Sciences research associate Mollie Smith. Inside an aquaponics greenhouse on a steaming September Wednesday, she sprinkled feed along the water's surface, attracting a thrashing, splashing hoard to its surface. "We know everything that has gone into their ecosystem."

It's the circle of life at Auburn's E.W. Shell Fisheries Center—and its cafeterias.

A *Montgomery Advertiser* review of the dining contracts at the four major universities in Alabama and Mississippi found that Auburn alone required specific local purchasing standards in their Aramark contracts. While other universities have "local food" programs, highlighting the occasional local ingredient or using vague language to suggest dining contractors buy local "when possible," Auburn requires dining to buy 20 percent of its annual products from Alabama businesses or out-of-state producers within a 200-mile radius, looping in nearby Georgia.

The commitment began to percolate nearly a decade ago, pushed forward by Auburn students interested in the local food movement and sustainability concerns. Glenn Loughridge, director of Dining Services, says one of the first meetings he took when he came to Auburn in 2012 was with the Auburn Real Food Challenge, a student group dedicated to getting 20 percent of "real" food ("local, fair, humane, and ecologically-sound") to campus by this year. Loughridge expects Auburn to meet that goal easily, but it will still take work.

"It's not a simple, 'We want Farmer John who lives down the street to sell us his field full of collard greens,'" Loughridge said. "We need to be able to trace back sources, to make sure they're certified, to make sure food is safe for our students to eat. It's not always a simple process of going to buy local stuff."

At the University of Alabama, Bama Dining promotes its "Homegrown Alabama" initiative, which denotes any locally grown and produced products at campus dining halls. According to UA's website, dining managers are "required to purchase" local products "whenever available."

"The dining halls at UA are unlike local restaurants that can promote all local ingredients, in that a local restaurant may serve 400 guests in a typical day, and at UA we serve over 6,000 meals in an average day," Kristina Patridge, director of UA's Dining Services, said. "We purchase what we can, but if we can only get three cases of a certain item, we serve it until it is gone, and then may have to use products from another source."

At Auburn, produce comes from Clanton; dairy from Thomasville, Georgia; Alabama-made products from Evergreen and Dadeville. Auburn also loops in its own meat services department. Tilapia from Auburn's flourishing hydroponics research appears as fish tacos in Auburn dining halls. Cucumbers from aquaponics greenhouses accent freshly picked lettuce salads.

"IT'S NOT A SIMPLE, 'WE WANT FARMER JOHN WHO LIVES DOWN THE STREET TO SELL US HIS FIELD FULL OF COLLARD GREENS.'"

"You win the hearts and minds when somebody tastes something that is different," Loughridge said. "When you have a tomato that's been vine-ripened and brought to campus that day, it's a different experience than that pulpy tomato from somewhere else. With campus food, students might have the feeling that they're a captured market, so you don't try as hard. We want to dispel that. We're trying harder."

Melissa Brown is an enterprise reporter focusing on criminal justice and public health issues at the *Montgomery Advertiser.*

WORKING LUNCH

A Georgia farm encourages a midday meal together.

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDRÉ GALLANT

IT'S LUNCHTIME ON A HOT SEPTEMBER day at 3 Porch Farm, a cut flower grower near Comer, Georgia. The broad canopy of a golden rain tree offers relative cool to workers who slump onto folding chairs set around a weathered wooden table. Others remain standing, eager to return to the gomphrena harvest. Plastic container tops pop open, and the questions begin.

Edwin Cabrera, a thirty-five-year-old immigrant from El Salvador, tucks into steak and string bean leftovers. He asks what's in a tin that his coworker, Marry, a resettled refugee from Burma, just slid to the middle of the table. It's a pepper paste, she responds, a spongy, fermented mix of dried birdseye chiles and freshwater minnows. Edwin showers his dish with the mixture.

"No pupusas?" asks Naw Dee Poe, who, like Marry Yin, her sister, is a resettled Burmese refugee in her forties. She identifies as Karen, one of the many ethnic groups long persecuted by a Buddhist military regime in her home country. She moved to Comer in 2012, after a year in Atlanta. Before that, she spent nearly two decades in a refugee camp, where the Karen survived on rations provided by the United Nations and whatever greens they could sneak past guards after clandestine foraging missions.

Naw Dee Poe examines Edwin's grilled food and recalls the time he made his homeland's specialty for their crew. Those pupusas, cornmeal pockets stuffed with chicharrón and made at home by Edwin, marked her first encounter with Latin American food. She liked them, and came to understand something about Edwin, who grew up selling the portable meal with his aunts at the Guatemalan border.

Still, Naw Dee Poe prefers food like what Marry brought: Chinese eggplant in a rich curry, which Edwin forks a sample of and adds to his meal.

Today, Naw Dee Poe isn't very hungry. She accepts a piece of bread slathered

OPPOSITE: Naw Dee Poe collects gomphrena. BELOW: A lunch spread.

with peanut butter and topped with bananas and blueberries offered by US-born Mandy and Steve O'Shea, who started the farm in 2012. She nibbles at the crust. She's tried bread before—found it gross initially—but it's grown on her, a little. Her kids like it. Public school lunches acquainted Karen youth with US staples like pizza and hamburgers. But Karen parents, like Naw Dee Poe, rarely eat beyond their cultural standards.

"This is white people food," she laughs, and leaves half the slice uneaten.

Lunches at 3 Porch Farm are a fairly recent addition to the workday. The O'Sheas once pressured themselves to work to the point of exhaustion (they live on the property, so this happens with ease) and therefore skipped meals. Some of their crew followed suit. The Karen women knew little about wage labor or lunch breaks, having been prohibited from working while living in refugee camps. They toiled without interruption, unaware of the customary midday break in the United States. Two years ago, doctors advised the O'Sheas and their crew to take it easy. Lunch breaks became mandatory for everyone—a paid hour to rest.

Dining across differences of race, culture, and nationality is fraught with power dynamics invisible to the most well-meaning, welcoming hosts.

Often working on different corners of the farm, the 3 Porch workers now sometimes lunch together.

Mandy hoped to address another matter with lunch: Her employees knew little about each other. Divisions of the farm crew—three weeders and harvesters, a wholesale manager, and Edwin, a field manager—each work on opposite corners of the nine-acre farm. Days can pass without coworkers crossing paths between zinnia rows and clover patches.

Mandy worried her crew didn't consider themselves a team. She hoped eating together might change that. She also recognized an opportunity for cultural exchange. Comer (population 1,170) is an overwhelmingly white town. Black and Latinx people make up a minority. But in the past decade, hundreds of Karen have moved to Comer, lured from bigger cities by a slow pace of life, agricultural jobs, and a verdant landscape that more closely resembles the forests of home. Their presence has reshaped life in Comer, from public schools to workplaces like 3 Porch Farm, where Naw Dee Poe has farmed part-time for nearly four years.

The more Edwin and Naw Dee Poe knew about each other, Mandy thought, the more they'd feel part of something bigger. Maybe they'd connect as farmers and also people far from home. Maybe work would feel like more than chores.

By sharing pupusas and pepper paste, the crew begins to bridge differences. Mandy hopes these bonds can stick. Perhaps a sense of family will blossom, because that's how she and Steve have come to think of them. "We're lucky to have this diversity," Mandy says. "If we didn't have the community we have, I don't think I'd enjoy the farm as much, living in the country as much."

SOCIAL SCIENTISTS USE the term "commensality" to describe the goodwill created when people share food and conversation. When we eat together, the hope goes, we learn about each other. Small acts of hospitality, writes Australian sociologist Amanda Wise, contain "the possibility of incremental openings of identity, where the food,

bodies, and narratives of the other seep across identity boundaries." Much can be gleaned about our neighbors and coworkers by gathering around a table. Much can be revealed about ourselves, for better or worse.

Dining across differences of race, culture, and nationality is fraught with power dynamics invisible to the most well-meaning, welcoming hosts. Inviting someone who spent their formative years eating UN-rationed rice and protein drinks to Thanksgiving dinner, for example, seems kind. But a buffet laden with traditional dishes represents a dominant culture to which, no matter the good intentions, the immigrant or refugee remains an Other. There's a pressure on the Other to appreciate what's been offered. That tension can stop goodwill and cultural exchange before it starts.

More equitable, Wise advises, is the potluck, a meal that's a little bit us, a little bit them, maybe a little bit we. The gathering can acknowledge difference, even celebrate it. A guest can nibble at an odd ingredient, then retreat to the safety of the dish they made themselves, sated by the familiar while glimpsing the new.

Group lunches at 3 Porch Farm mimic a potluck, and the stakes are low. Eating together is never mandatory, nor is sharing. Most days, Edwin chooses the solitude of his truck, where air conditioning runs cold and the banda tunes resound. The Karen women worry that Western noses find their food—often seasoned by fish paste, a pungent condiment that provided needed calories in refugee camps—a bit stinky. Mandy and Steve assure them that's not the case. Nevertheless, the women often find comfort in seclusion, and their bosses don't argue.

"It's about what they need," Steve says. Forcing fellowship, they know, could ruin morale.

ANOTHER ATTEMPT AT an international potluck turned out well the following Thursday. Mandy warmed leftover pulled pork barbecue and cracked open a jar of homemade pickles. She set out a plate of sliced white bread as well as a leftover bowl of Marry's hot pepper paste, which she'd set aside for herself the previous week. Edwin forgot to make the pupusas he'd promised, much to everyone's dismay. But Naw Dee Poe brought extra helpings of wheat noodles and stir-fried long beans, seasoned with soy sauce and garlic. In a bowl of dark broth that she fixed for everyone to share, reeds of lemongrass, pounded, salted, and fermented for seven days, floated alongside boiled radish tops.

Not everyone felt social and nobody blamed them. The September heat was punishing. Wah Sha, another resettled refugee who'd recently been out sick, wanted to rest. She laid down on the floor of the farm's flower studio, a packing house with a wash station, walk-in cooler, and work tables. She propped her head on a foot stool, skipping lunch to stay prone for as long as possible.

Marry preferred her friends' quiet company in the shed and tucked into leftovers: small portions of scrambled eggs and greens in a tin, noodles eaten straight out of a thermos by hand. Mandy still hoped that Marry, who had only worked on the farm for a few months, might try pulled pork for the first time—the Karen call it "sweet pig." Mandy set out a bowl of it, a pickle balanced on the lip, with an encouragement for Marry to try it.

Lunchtime conversations about diet and plants have led to improvements around the farm. Carpetweed, a plant that thrusts past landscape fabric and crawls rapidly across flower beds, is now known at 3 Porch by its Karen name, ta kah doh. It's good for digestion, Naw Dee Poe says. If the Karen women spy some, they snatch it up as a snack or for dinner that night. Once a plague, it's now a rare find on the farm.

Wah Sha and Naw Dee Poe clip pokeweed for bouquets.

Mandy and Steve hope they've been supportive bosses. When Edwin left for El Salvador to apply for a green card after marrying his US-born wife, complications kept him there for nearly a year. His job awaited him when he got back. Applying for naturalization sent Naw Dee Poe on excursion after excursion to federal offices in Atlanta. The O'Sheas did everything they could to help shuttle her back and forth. They celebrated both paths to citizenship with farm parties.

In an era when xenophobes tar immigrants as job thieves and bar refugees, the intimacy between bosses and employees at 3 Porch Farm provides an example of how a better world can begin with everyday actions. If we stop to eat, talk, and learn with coworkers, we enmesh ourselves in their experiences. We share in struggles and success. It's naive to believe communal meals can fix vast inequalities, but some solutions might start with a lunch box.

Naw Dee Poe and Mandy collected dirty dishes and headed into the flower studio. Marry and Wah Sha were already back to work, washing and drying plastic bouquet buckets. Song in the Sgaw Karen language and laughter set to the rhythm of sloshing water echoed around the room. Naw Dee Poe joined her friends as Mandy laid out the weeding plan for that afternoon. As she walked away, Mandy picked up the untouched bowl of sweet pig she'd left for Marry. Marry pursed her lips, shook her head, then laughed. No thanks, couldn't do it.

Mandy shrugged. There's no rush. She'd try again another day.

André Gallant is a journalist based in Athens, Georgia, and the author of A High Low Tide: The Revival of a Southern Oyster *from the University of Georgia Press.*

HOW TO MAKE TAMALES IN PRISON

It all depends on community—and a complicated supply chain.

BY JASON HERNANDEZ

When I met 42-year-old Jason Hernandez of McKinney, Texas, a year ago, I listened to him describe how he spent most of his young adulthood in prison after a disproportionately harsh sentence. I heard some pain, little rancor, and a talent for storytelling. Eventually released from prison, Hernandez now helps incarcerated people petition for release or lighter sentences. When we were done talking about the weighty stuff, he spontaneously and joyously riffed on the food that nourished him physically and spiritually in prison.

Below, he talks about running a food business behind bars. —Cynthia Greenlee

I CAME FROM A REGULAR FAMILY like anybody else. American tradition: mother and father, you eat at home, work, go to school. My parents would go to work, and we always had dinner at 5:00 or 4:30, like a family. Like no matter where you're at in the city or what have you, we come to the house at 4:30 because mom was going to have dinner.

Despite my mother and father being hard workers and very disciplined and religious, me myself, I just took to the streets. And got involved in drug dealing. Went to prison for life without parole, plus 320 years for a nonviolent drug crime at the age of twenty-one. Became a "jailhouse attorney" and there filed my own clemency petition. I wrote a letter to President Barack Obama asking him to release me. And he ultimately did. December 19th, 2013, he granted my petition for commutation and reduced my time to twenty years. Ultimately did nearly eighteen years in prison. I went in when I was twenty-one. I got out when I was almost thirty-nine.

I always tell people, if you want something figured out, how to do something, ask a prisoner. Because in there, they're always

Photographs by Cooper Neill

gonna figure out a way to make something happen. And they're going to be like MacGyver, very creative and innovative.

I had a friend named Lucky. He was a Mexican, too, just like me. And he was older than me. And people kinda looked at him like he was a grouch. I mean, the guy had a life sentence. He'd been in there eight or nine years. He had the right to be a grouch. But he wasn't. He was a real cool dude when you got to know him.

It's like a brotherhood of lifers. I lived in a cell right next to Lucky. Me being Mexican, Lucky being Mexican, Lucky was always mentoring me, giving me psychology books to read, books on my culture and heritage, giving me books that made me think about the brain.

But Lucky could cook. I'm not lying. I mean, he can make lo mein. He can make fried rice. He was a great cook, but he didn't cook for anybody. I got to say, he only would feed about three or four people, only Mexicans. He wasn't racist, but prison is very segregated.

One of the things that Lucky could do was make tamales. And he was real secretive about his recipe and how he went about it. We're Mexicans, right? Tamales are a kind of sacred to us.

You make tamales out of corn, out of masa. And obviously, we don't have the masa there.

He would get bags of Doritos. And I'd grind them and smash them as much as I possibly could until they actually turned back into almost a dust. Almost. Once you get that, then you put really, really hot water in there. Then you're mixing them; we get the butter from the kitchen delivered to us. And it turns right back to a masa and we start making these little balls smaller than a tennis ball.

But when Lucky left to transfer to another prison, I started to hustle. I had like my own little restaurant in there where I would sell food on the weekends.

One day, I think, 'Hey, you know, I'm going to make tamales for the Super Bowl.' Again, it was just a seasonal thing. You don't make tamales all the time.

The next thing you know, I mean, I actually got orders for half a dozen tamales, two dozen. Here I am, with one hundred-fifty to two hundred tamales. My celly and me stayed up to two or three in the morning before Super Bowl. But I have that entrepreneurial spirit, and I ended up doing it on a weekly basis.

When I sold drugs, I figured out how to network, how to market, the packaging, the distribution. So when I went to prison, I knew I could look back and sit back and say, 'OK. How do I get the food for tamales? How do I make them?' There's no way I could possibly do it myself.

So I have to recruit people. I told my friends, 'I'll pay you so much to crush the corn chips, so much to turn it into masa.' [I needed] somebody at the microwave who's cooking them as they're being made, someone to deal with delivery orders. Some would want a dozen of just bean and cheese ones, you had people who didn't eat meat. Then you have to think about the Muslim guys in there who didn't want pork. I was always just trying to accommodate everybody. I got to the point where selling maybe three hundred tamales Saturday through Sunday made me hundred, a couple hundred dollars.

> I always tell people, if you want something figured out, how to do something, ask a prisoner. ... They're going to be like MacGyver, very creative and innovative.

And I had friends that were in different units. I walked them through the process. I was way more open and more liberal than Lucky. They could start like their own little tamale business in their unit. In the big picture, there's a beauty to it and there's a whole community-building process. For however long you're in prison, you'd have a way to make money now. And it wouldn't affect my business.

How did we get the food? You put in an order just like you would out here if you're a chef and you own a restaurant.

In the actual prison unit where we sleep at and where the TV is, we have microwaves. We have what's called a commissary in there, like the canteen.

This was the federal system. It wasn't like what you'd imagine or what you'd get in state prison or what's on TV. In the morning there was biscuits and gravy. And every meal had a name to it. And I don't know if this is appropriate to say, but, you know, we called that 'shit on a shingle.' But you got all your vegetables and fruits and things to that extent. You also got more of the low-quality chicken or the low-quality fish. Beef patties. Baloney and stuff like that.

At the commissary, you could buy sausages. You could buy little bags of clams and oysters, octopus, mackerel, salmon, pork skins.

But the people that work in the kitchen, that actually cook us our food, they don't get paid. Or they get paid pennies. It's hard to cook for 2,000 people at breakfast, lunch, and dinner. So the way that they make money is they, you know, I guess you could call it stealing.

They take stuff out of the kitchen, such as onions, bell peppers, tomatoes, broccoli, cabbage, and they smuggle that out of the secure room that they're in. And we buy them. There are what we called the runners. They're like Amazon delivery or UPS.

They go through all the checkpoints where there's guards searching people.

But they don't search everybody. You got ten pieces of chicken on you; you can't just hold them in a bag, stick them under your shirt, and have a big lump. So you want to get somebody that's kind of skinny already, so you would tape food around their stomach. They might get a waist trimmer, pack it around their waist.

They might get, like, six tomatoes in Saran wrap, taped to their calf, or put on those diabetic compression socks that go all the way up to your thighs. So it was not that unusual for a guy to have five onions in a row, on his knee down to his ankle, like, five onions in a row. If you don't make it through the checkpoints, you know, you don't get paid.

Yeah, there is a big economy. The vegetable prep guys, the butcher, those guys probably make about four or five hundred dollars a month. The runners probably make about half of that.

From my knowledge of federal prison, the currency is actually mailing stamps. But each individual stamp was a quarter, twenty-five cents, when I was in there. So if I tell you I want a dollar worth of curry and you bring me my curry, I'm going to give you four stamps. A tomato might be two stamps.

We had an officer whose name was Death Row. Whoever was going through there with something, he just knew. I mean, I don't know if he could smell food on somebody or whatever, but he knew everybody to pick out of a line.

So we would have to figure out, 'OK, what day does he work? What hours does he work if he's there? What type of distraction can we do?' It was funny because I'm gonna put like ten tomatoes on me, under my shirt and I'm going to act nervous. I'm going to have a little bulge on the side of my shirt. They're going to bust me with the tomatoes. But you guys come in with the rest of the twenty tomatoes, twenty bell peppers, the seasoning. We'd have the decoy get pulled over. Everybody else passes through.

In the unit, you would have a little trash can wrapped up with blankets around it, then a waist trimmer around the trash can. And then you have the ice in it, and you make a layer out of cardboard. And then you put food in there and keep it cold. So it don't go bad or bacteria starts to grow on it.

And the cooking process I learned from Lucky: You turn irons upside down and you make them stable. You have to tell the workers in the kitchen when you're ordering your food to bring some some pie pans, those little foil pie dishes. You put that pie pan on top of the iron, and it heats up just like a skillet almost.

I put my tamales and fried rice up against anybody's. I had a tamales cookoff with my mom. Everybody in the family loved mine. They only ate one of hers. I think my mom likes mine, but she won't admit it.

You know, life's not over for people that are in prison, right? I was a chef. I was a jailhouse attorney. I had a restaurant. I had my own franchise in there just about. At the end of the day, like, we're human. We still crave those things we grew up with: tamales, menudo, chicken-fried steak, whatever. Whatever your background or culture provided you.

One thing that I learned was if you feed someone like an animal (and they're caged up and having guards watch them all the time), they act like an animal. And at a prison where they fed you like a real human being, people acted more civilized. There's no such thing as a better prison, but there's a correlation between what and how you feed people and how they act. I think, without a doubt, that's true, whether for people in prison or even out here.

Cynthia R. Greenlee is deputy editor of Gravy.

ORDER OF THE OKRA

THE ORDER OF THE OKRA IS SFA'S LEADERSHIP GIVING SOCIETY. WE APPRECIATE DONORS TO THE 2019 ORDER OF THE OKRA.

Scott Adelman • Ann and Lex Alexander • **Beverly and Danny Alm** Lisa and Bill Andrews • **Joyce Arnold** • Marks Arnold • **Stacey Ballis and Bill Thurmond** • Bev Bartow • **Kreis Beall** • Michael Benedict **Karen Benson** • Sharon and Allan Benton • **Greg Best** • Hannah and Tommy Bishop • **Ralph Brennan** • Deanna Brewer • **Bright Star Restaurant** • Virginia Brooks • **Tyler Brown** • Eliza Brown • **Robert Brownell** • Griffin Bufkin • **Katie Button Restaurants** • Ashley Christensen **Elizabeth and Grant Clark** • JoAnn Clevenger • **Ginger and Tom Colquitt** • Faison Cushman • **Denise and Fred Cypress** • Nancy Davis and Richard Ashmore • **Ashley Day** • Charles Day • **Martha and Adam Derbyshire** • Lynne DeSpelder and Albert Strickland • **William Dissen** Rebecca Emerick • **Duke Eversmeyer** • Pat and Richard Fairtile • **FARM Bluffton** • Paul Fehribach • **Rien Fertel** • Diane and Chuck Flynt **Michael Fojtasek** • Anne and Terry Freeze • **Caren and Tom Gallaher** Alexis and Wynn Giles • **Steven Greene** • Doris and Gus Gusler • **Vince Hayward** • Steve Hedberg • **Heirloom Café** • Elizabeth and Luke Heiskell • **Blair Hobbs and John T. Edge** • Tim Hontzas • **Gina and Linton Hopkins** • Cathy and Jay Howington • **Alba Huerta** • Ann and Jimmy Hunt • **Ashley and Shannon Johnson** • Deanna and Scott Jones **Meredith and Scott Keating** • Katy and Joe Kindred • **Joyce King** Kat Kinsman • **Merrill and Lauren Klapthor** • Mary Beth Lasseter and Ned Mitchell • **Grace and David Lawson** • Dianne and Edward Lee **Rob Long** • Barbara and Michael LoPresti • **Caroline and Leighton Lord** • Marley Lott • **Davis Love III** • Celeste and Ben Luke • **Susan Marquis and Chris Thompson** • Deborah McAbee and Byron Morris **Dean McCord** • Nancie McDermott • **Cindy and Sam McGann** • Jennifer and Kennard McKay • **Brittney and Matt Miller** • Bobby Moore • **Angie and Johnny Mosier** • Claire and Billy Moss • **Eli Motycka** • Joli and Mac Nichols • **Amy and Chad Norton** • Katie Oates and Dan Murrey **Jackie and Jay Oglesby** • Thompson Okumodi • **Eliza Kraft Olander** Old Edwards Hospitality Group • **Michael Oates Palmer** • Les Pinsof **John Pope** • Leanne and Mike Powell • **Red Truck Rural Bakery** • Blake Riber • **Cappy Ricks** • Linda and Rathead Riley • **Peter Roy** • Carol Sawdye and Johno Morisano • **Ed Seiber** • Ron Shapiro • **Erwin Shatzen** Susan and David Shaw • **Trey Sheridan** • Christin and Jason Smith **Pam and Brook Smith** • Debra and Mitch Sonkin • **JJ and Gerry Spedale** • Diane and Jim Stark • **Pardis and Frank Stitt** • Jessica and Michael Sznapstajler • **Marian and Lance Templeton** • The Jefferson Hotel • **The Umstead Hotel & Spa** • Gibson Thomas • **Fred Thompson** Adrienne and Todd Tillmanns • **Laurie and Jeff Triplette** • Memorie White • **Sissy and Julian Van Winkle** • Jenny Vergos • **George Weld** Brittney and Jan Westerman • **Jennifer and Tom Williams** • Kevin Young • **Leslie and Dag Zapatero**

Please consider a gift to the SFA and join the Order of the Okra with a pledge of $1000 or more. Gifts may be made online at *southernfoodways.org.* For questions about giving, please contact Claire Moss at *claire@southernfoodways.org* or 901.409.5991.

RATHEAD RILEY: THE GREAT GATHERER

He's also known as SFA's Auction Wrangler.

BY ROB LONG

Mike "Rathead" Riley is the inaugural recipient of the SFA's Standard-Bearer award, given in recognition of exceptional service to the SFA and the South.

THE FIRST WORDS MIKE "RATHEAD" Riley said to me were, "Who are you? And why are you here?"

It was more than ten years ago. I was holding a chicken leg at the time. In that respect, it was a typical Southern Foodways Alliance Symposium. And he posed the question with such disarming bluster, with a smile and a firm hand on my arm, that I did what you do when Rathead Riley enters your life for the very first time.

I told him everything. The drumstick remained mid-air. My chicken hand was held in place by Rathead's friendly grip. And I told him who I was and that I had come to Oxford, Mississippi, from Los Angeles; that my father's family was from the South; that I had read John T. Edge's *Southern Belly* and that it had guided me through the South on a road trip the summer before; that I was a little dumbstruck by the brilliance of the Symposium's speakers and program; and that my chicken was getting cold.

He released my arm with a laugh. "Nice to meet you, lad," he boomed. "My name is Rathead."

But what's your real name? I asked.

"Rathead. Rathead Riley."

It seemed too early in our friendship for insulting nicknames. I don't think I can call you Rathead, I said.

His smile faded and he looked at me intently. "I really wish you would," he said.

And so of course I did. Rathead has that effect on people.

For many of us, he is the first person we meet at an SFA event. "I stand at the back of the room at an SFA event," he told me recently, "and when people come in, I shake hands with them. It's social curiosity. I want to know who those

Mike "Rathead" Riley at his home, which is filled with mementos of SFA and his many food adventures.

Photographs by Shawn Poynter

people are. My favorite question is, Why are you here? Why are you at the SFA? It just ..." He searches for the right word.

"It just gathers them in."

When Rathead Riley talks, he often makes a gathering-in gesture. I'm pretty sure it's unconscious. He makes a wide and open circle with his arms, like a dancer or a circus bear. It's hard not to lean into the gesture. It's hard not to feel the gravitational pull of Planet Rathead.

I have watched the scene repeat many times since that first moment. I have seen Rathead walk into a room of near strangers and turn them into fast friends in the time it takes an ordinary person (me, for instance) to order a drink and stand awkwardly against the wall. I have watched Rathead make his way through a crowded restaurant, snaking behind the bar and then disappearing into the kitchen, only to emerge a few moments later with a couple of line cooks in tow clutching cold beers, gifts from their new best friend. I have watched, slack-jawed with astonishment, as he charms and cajoles and marshals rooms of auction-goers into spending more than they had planned—a lot more, always—on Rathead-conceived and Rathead-assembled dinners and events, all to benefit the Southern Foodways Alliance.

One time, I approached Rathead and a group of people, and the group was laughing so merrily together, so much like old friends that I was inspired to ask, even though I knew the answer, how long they had known Rathead.

"We just met," was the answer. And then, more quietly: "Who is this guy?"

First things first: Rathead Riley was not born Rathead Riley. He was born Michael Riley, and despite the perfection of his Southern style and manners, he was born in New Jersey. His family moved to Jacksonville, Florida, a place of good neighbors and cookouts and cold beers in the backyard. After high school, Mike Riley went up north a bit to Lexington, Virginia, to study at Washington and Lee University.

It was sometime during his second year at W&L when Mike Riley came back to his college room with a rather drastic haircut. It was short enough to amplify the perpendicular quality of his ears and the pointy-ness of his nose, and it inspired his roommate to blurt out the first thing that came to his mind, which was that Mike Riley's haircut made his head look like a rat.

The nickname stuck. And so in 1968 Mike Riley became Rathead Riley, and it's impossible to imagine that moment without also imagining a thunderclap, or a burst of heavenly light. In the movie version of the life of Rathead Riley, this scene is accompanied by Richard Strauss' "Also sprach Zarathustra," which is the fancy name for the music that plays in the movie *2001: A Space Odyssey* at the moment the human race achieves its full potential. In other words, it was a very big moment.

HE HAS TOLD that story many times, of course. When you insist that people call you Rathead, you're obliged to unspool the tale. I have heard it many times. Most recently, though, I heard it on a muggy September afternoon in Bristol, Virginia, on the screened-in porch of the house he shares with his wife, Linda. I was there trying to get Rathead Riley to do something—maybe the only thing—that makes him uncomfortable and cranky. I was trying to get him to talk about himself.

"Do you think you were Rathead before you got the nickname?" I ask.

A flicker of irritation crosses his face. "How could I be?"

"Well, you were still yourself, right? I mean, you had your personality and your—"

He interrupts me with a wave of his

hand and taps his watch. Rathead has given me thirty minutes to ask my questions, and he's eager to begin what he calls "rosé time."

"When I introduce myself to people as Rathead," he says, "it often draws a chuckle. People say, 'What?' But think about walking into a room with the nickname Rathead as opposed to coming in with your name, Rob, or whatever. In a fun way, it gives you a leg up. Because people will say, there are nine Robs in this room, there are four Bills, two Marys—"

"But only one Rathead," I say.

He nods. "The nickname has served me well."

About the only person who does not use the nickname is Rathead's wife, Linda. She calls him Mike, and if you listen closely you can hear a quiet emphasis in her voice as she does so. "Mike and I ..." she will say, or she will sometimes fix him with a look after a long night out and say, "Mike, it might be time to go ..." To Linda, Rathead Riley is always Mike Riley. Perhaps that's because Linda does not need to be "gathered in." Rathead, for his part, almost always refers to his wife by her full name. It's "Linda Riley and I ..." or "I went there with Linda Riley," as if the blunt force of his nickname could be softened by this little tidbit of chivalry.

The house they share—they are empty-nesters, with three grown daughters and assorted grandchildren—is big, airy, and surrounded by trees. On the walls are framed menus from Rathead's many SFA-benefit dinners and original paintings by Linda Riley. There's a large and beautiful kitchen, a stocked wine cellar, windows overlooking the treetops of the sloping back lawn.

Rathead started his career as a junior executive in the coal business. Coal was the economic lifeblood of the region, and the business had pretty much stayed the same for decades. Coal producers would sell their product to a middleman, who would in turn resell it to someone else, usually a steel manufacturer. (Steel requires a lot of energy to produce.) By the early 1970s, the Japanese and European steel industries were shaking off their postwar doldrums and it occurred to the entrepreneurial Rathead Riley that it might make more sense for his coal-producing company to sell directly to steel manufacturers around the world.

It's hard to picture the big, generous, boom-voiced Rathead of today as a suited young coal industry executive, asking for permission from his bosses to try something new. But that's exactly what he did. Soon he was on a plane to Paris, tasked with developing relationships and connections with steel producers throughout France. Tasked, in other words, with gathering in.

Another "Also sprach Zarathustra" scene from the Rathead Riley biopic: Cut to a fancy three-star restaurant in Paris. Young Rathead Riley—who has not quite convinced his new French customers to use his W&L nickname—is hosting an important dinner. He has gathered around the table the key steel makers of

THIS PAGE: Artwork by Amy C. Evans

France, and he is attempting to wine and dine them into becoming direct customers of his company. The dining part is easy: These are Frenchmen, after all. They know their way around a menu.

The wine part, though, is a problem. As the sommelier deposits the gigantic wine list at Rathead's place—he's the host; ordering the wine is his responsibility—he's suddenly overcome with the realization that he doesn't know a thing about wine. He has no idea which wines go with which dishes, or how to make sense of the various growths and appellations and villages and communes that fill the unreadable book in front of him.

Somehow, the sommelier senses the panic and comes, discreetly, to his rescue.

If you're with the wrong people, it doesn't matter how good the food or wine is. You won't enjoy the meal.

Perhaps Monsieur would like to start with a white wine? And then maybe a red for the meat? We can also offer a dessert wine at the end if Monsieur would be agreeable?

Monsieur was agreeable. And though the crisis was averted, Rathead Riley made a vow to himself: This would never happen again. On his return to Bristol, he invested in an at-home wine course, the *Windows on the World Complete Wine Course* by the legendary sommelier and wine educator Kevin Zraly. He taught himself what all of those growths and appellations and villages and communes really were.

Rathead became an oenophile, and what's more, he convinced his friends to join him. Soon they had created a wine club, the Bright Young Oenophiles of Bristol—BYOB, for short—and hosted annual wine dinners with guest chefs from around the South. Not long after that, when his daughter was an undergraduate at the University of Mississippi, she told him about a new organization on campus called the Southern Foodways Alliance. It seemed like something he might be interested in.

It was, in fact, exactly that. Linda Riley and Rathead joined the SFA. Rathead gathered in some of his BYOB friends as well. For a few years, in fact, the Bristol area boasted the highest per capita membership in the Southern Foodways Alliance. Rathead joined the SFA board and was the key driver of its fundraising efforts. From there it was just a short, straight line to the Taste of the South weekend at Blackberry Farm, in Walland, Tennessee, where every January a thoughtful and meticulously planned auction—dinners and events and experiences that simply cannot be found anywhere else, for any amount of money—is conducted by the most cheerfully relentless auctioneer ever, Rathead Riley.

His official title at that event is Auction Wrangler. His unofficial title is Southern Foodways Alliance Rain King. His yearly work assembling the lots and his electrifying performance with the auctioneer's gavel have allowed the Southern Foodways Alliance to grow in reach and impact.

"Why do you do it?" I ask.

Rathead looks at me, then at his watch. I have kept him long enough. He sighs.

"It's the history, the substance, of what's going on in the South when it comes to food. I think that all of the content that the SFA has developed over the years is magnificent. It's important."

All of that is true, of course. Rathead's devotion to the Southern Foodways Alliance and its mission is unwavering. But what's curious is that in our wide-ranging conversation about wine and food, about chefs and dinners, while he sighed and squirmed and did his best to talk about anything and everything but himself, we didn't really talk about food. He never mentioned specific dishes, the way some food enthusiasts will. He didn't talk about this chef's biscuits or that chef's pork.

He talked about the people. He talked about the chefs and their families. He spoke about the films and oral histories the SFA has produced and the people they chronicle. He talked about the chefs who donate their time and labor for his auction experiences, the winemakers and importers who offer up their connections and their bottles, the people who bid generously on each item. What he didn't talk about was food.

We know this to be true: If you're with the wrong people, it doesn't matter how good the food or wine is. You won't enjoy the meal. But if you're with friends, a mediocre meal can feel like a feast.

"It's almost six o'clock, Rob," he says, with real annoyance in his voice. "All of these questions … I really think you're just embarrassing yourself." He looks stern, and then he smiles. It's rosé time. I can't put it off any longer.

"I'm not analytical," he says finally. "I'm not a goal setter. I'm just what's in the moment. I'm just always asking myself, *How can you make sure you're connecting with people?*"

I remind him that earlier that day, as we walked through the Abingdon farmers' market, he said hello to everyone. And then later that afternoon, at the Birthplace of Country Music Museum, he introduced me to every employee in sight. Why is it so important to do that?

He waves me off and points to his watch and makes a wine-pouring gesture. "Wherever I go," he says, "on vacation or going to a meeting or something like that, walking down the street, I make eye contact with everybody. If they get pissed off, that's their loss."

Then he laughs.

"Even in New York City. If I'm walking in the morning, it's, 'Good morning! How are you doing?' And I don't realize that a lot of these people have these earbuds in their ears. They don't hear you."

"So what do you do then?"

"I look at Linda Riley and I say, 'Damn it, they didn't hear me. Gotta go back.' So I circle back. I circle back and run after them."

For a moment, I think he's serious. (In fact, I still think he's serious.)

A final "Also sprach Zarathustra" moment: Cut to Bramble Hall at Blackberry Farm. Rathead is on fire—the auction is once again breaking records. An intermittent bidder has foolishly made eye contact with Rathead and his tiger-like auction wrangling instincts have kicked in. He is focusing all of his attention on this one bidder, trying to elicit a higher bid for one of his priceless auction lots. He steps off of the platform and walks to her table, microphone in hand. His eyes never leave her eyes. "Don't look at him," he tells her when she looks to her husband for support. "Don't look at him. Look at me. Look at me." He leans in. "Do I have thirty-five?" He asks. She wavers. She hesitates. She starts and stops. And then the dam breaks. She breaks out into laughter and nods and raises her paddle. The audience explodes with joy.

The truth is, up against Rathead Riley, she never had a chance. None of us does.

Rob Long is a screenwriter and a former president of the SFA board of directors. SFA staff are fond of his early work on Cheers, *especially the episode in which Frasier reads* A Tale of Two Cities *to the bar, inserting a sewer-roaming evil clown into the Dickens classic.*

THE SPIRIT AND THE FOOD FEEDS THEM

Methodist camp meetings are a centuries-old tradition for black and white worshippers in South Carolina.

BY HOLLY LYNTON

FOUR CAMP MEETINGS OCCUR EVERY FALL IN DORCHESTER COUNTY, South Carolina. Also known as revivals, they conclude on successive Sundays in October. The tradition began in the 1790s during the Second Great Awakening and with the rise of Methodism in the United States. As settlers moved farther west into unpopulated areas, the Gospel was spread by itinerant ministers who rode on horseback to preach in fields or under arbors of trees. Attendees gathered for a week in tents and covered wagons. Later, wooden cabins replaced the cloth tents. The camp meetings in South Carolina represent some of the oldest, still active meetings in the nation.

Nighttime at the Indian Field camp meeting,

In the early years, these camps ministered to enslaved people and slaveholders alike, and enslaved people and free African Americans could serve as preachers in the 1700s. Historical research suggests that where black and white worshippers attended services in the same space, they were divided into separate seating sections.

After the Civil War, African Americans established their own camp meetings. In 1870, Shady Grove was established when a formerly enslaved man, Ceasar Wolfe, helped a rice farmer bring in his crops before a storm and was given the land for spiritual use in return. St. Paul started slightly later, around 1880, after members of the Harleyville congregation that gave the campground their name saved to buy the land.

Today, the camp meetings are still separated by race, although some sermons urge inclusiveness. At Indian Field, a minister opened with the line "we are divided not by race, but by racism" and encouraged the white attendees to embrace differences and heal the divides in our country.

Traditionally, families would move to the campground for the week and send their children to school from there. Now, while some families still adhere to that tradition, others attend for only a long weekend or go home to sleep in evening.

These camp meetings take place at a good time to celebrate the annual harvest. Tables show the bounty of vegetables: sweet potatoes, field peas, butter beans, black-eyed peas, cabbage, green beans. People grow and put away food all year to prepare. Fried chicken is a staple, served at both white and African American meetings.

At Indian Field and Cypress, experienced African American cooks prepare meals, mostly over wood-burning furnaces. Many cooks take a week off from other work to cook for the pay they will receive from each family. Others retired from their primary jobs, but still cook for the meetings each year. The meetings are staggered so that cooks may work at one camp and attend and cook for their own families at another one.

Dawn arrives at Indian Field campground.

At the black camp meetings, many families devote special nights to fish or wild game caught locally. Herbert Gardner, one of the St. Paul trustees, reported that his brother caught and cooked a beaver one year, although he was not brave enough to try it. This year dishes like Frogmore stew (cousin to a Lowcountry boil), blue crabs, fried fish, and shrimp boil were on the menu, as well as deer meat and raccoon.

Many elders wonder if the camp meeting tradition will survive the next decade. With that in mind, some younger adults recognize these gatherings' value and discuss ideas for reinvigorating this unique mix of family reunion, fellowship, and spiritual practice. A unifying element of camp meetings is the families' willingness to share their stories, their food, and their kindness with strangers. No visitor to a camp meeting will ever leave hungry.

Holly Lynton is a Massachusetts-based photographer who focuses on rural communities, agricultural history, and nature in the United States.

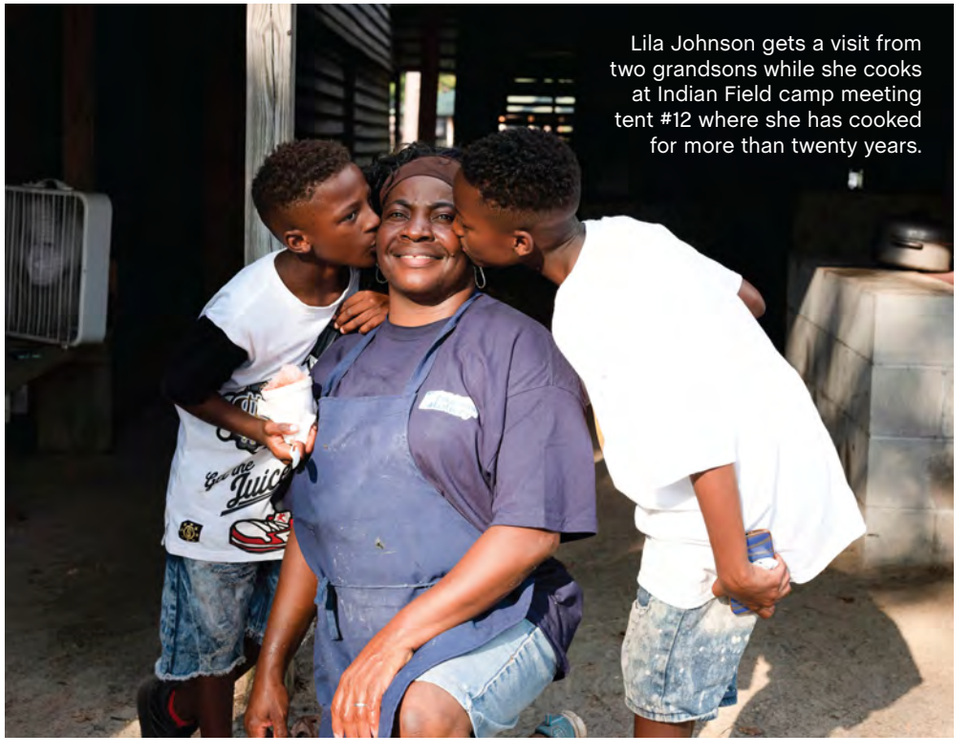
Boys play football before the evening meal at the Indian Field meeting.

Friends and cousins gather at the St. Paul camp meeting, and play a childhood game of “Concentration” on the front porch of their tent one rainy Saturday afternoon.

Freshly harvested cucumbers are prepared at the Indian Field camp meeting.

At St. Paul, Lila Johnson holds a pot of raccoon meat that she cooked with spices and bacon.

A young boy buys ice cream at one of the Shady Grove meeting stores.



Lila Johnson gets a visit from two grandsons while she cooks at Indian Field camp meeting tent #12 where she has cooked for more than twenty years.

The Strawberry Patch

I'VE BEEN KNOWING FARMER LEE—AS LEE MOORE IS CALLED—FOR A few years now, and all the love and care he puts into his farm never cease to amaze me. When I first met Farmer Lee, he talked about his bees and how he had some hives out by okra fields around his town of Princeton, Texas. Fast forward a few years later, and now he is making waves with his strawberry patch. After a few rounds of trial and error, he finally found the perfect mix of soil and mulch to help his patch grow and produce big, flavorful strawberries. This picture was approaching the end of strawberry season, and he wanted me to have some of his strawberries before it was too late. So he decided to harvest me some.

— BRITTANY CONERLY
photographer and writer

SFA GRAVY

Gravy is a publication of the Southern Foodways Alliance, an institute of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi.

The SFA documents, studies, and explores the diverse food cultures of the changing American South. Our work sets a welcome table where all may consider our history and our future in a spirit of respect and reconciliation.

JOHN T. EDGE Editor-in-Chief
johnt@southernfoodways.org

MARY BETH LASSETER Publisher
marybeth@southernfoodways.org

SARA CAMP MILAM Editor
saracamp@southernfoodways.org

CYNTHIA GREENLEE Deputy Editor
cynthia@southernfoodways.org

DANIELLE A. SCRUGGS Visuals Editor
danielle@southernfoodways.org

RICHIE SWANN Designer
richieswann@gmail.com

CARLYNN CROSBY AND OLIVIA TERENZIO
Nathalie Dupree Graduate Fellows and Fact Checkers

Character isn't made by machine.

Every bottle of Maker's Mark® Bourbon is still hand-dipped in our signature red wax.

Learn more at makersmark.com.

Maker's Mark®