



"I just know I could have tamed the angry beast of the KKK with my shrimp and grits!
You might hate me, but you're gonna love me for just a little while when you're eating my food."

— Clayton Sherrod at the Alabama in Black and White Field Trip

NUMBER 15, SUMMER 2004

NEWS FROM THE SOUTHERN FOODWAYS ALLIANCE

First in War, First in Peace, First in Whiskey: George Washington as Distiller

By Thomas Head

George Washington's fame as a soldier and president has tended to overshadow his considerable accomplishments as farmer, architect, livestock breeder, and entrepreneur. He worked tirelessly to improve the profitability and efficiency of his 8,000-acre Mount Vernon estate. In his late 20s, he made the decision to turn from tobacco as his main crop to wheat. In 1771, he built a gristmill, a profitable venture that enabled him to market his flour both locally and abroad. In 1797, at the urging of his Scottish plantation manager James Anderson, who had experience in distilling, Washington built a distillery adjacent to the mill. The distillery, one of the largest on the east coast, made 11,000 gallons of whiskey the first year and produced a profit of \$7,500, an enormous sum at the time.

The gristmill was restored and opened to the public in 2002. Now, with the assistance of the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States, a trade association of distillers and wholesalers, Washington's distillery is being reconstructed and will open to the public in 2006 as the only operating 18th-century-style distillery in the country.

The first step in the restoration has been an extensive archeological excavation of the site. The dig, which began in 1999, is now in its final stages. The excavation and research into contemporary documents have revealed that Washington's distillery was a large sandstone building, about 30 by 75 feet, which held about 50 mash tubs and five pot stills. A second floor, which originally was used for grain storage and living quarters for the distillery manager, will be transformed into a museum and auditorium.



The Vendome Copper and Brass Works of Louisville, Kentucky, will fabricate the distillery's five copper pot stills. They are replicas of an 18th-century still, now in the collection of the Smithsonian Institution, confiscated by the Treasury Department in Fairfax County, Virginia, in the 1940s.

A model of the still was fired up last fall at the site, and the master distillers from a dozen modern distilleries, all dressed in 18th-century costumes for the occasion, made the first whiskey made on the site in 200 years. The mash recipe, reconstructed from the distillery's accounts, consisted of 60 percent rye, 35 percent corn, and 5 percent barley, a formula that would make it closer in composition to today's rye whiskey than to bourbon. The initial batch of whiskey will be aged for several years in port casks and then sold to benefit Mount Vernon's educational programs.

The reconstruction of Washington's distillery is a fascinating project for many reasons. It gives us an insight into the economics of plantation management in the post-Colonial South. It gives us a fascinating glimpse of our first president as entrepreneur. And it gives us a way of looking at the place of alcohol in colonial society.

Did Washington drink the whiskey he made? Probably not much. He certainly felt it necessary to the running of an army. "The benefits arising from the moderate use of liquor have been experienced in all armies," he wrote to the president of Congress, "and are not to be disputed." Records confirm that in addition to whiskey, apple, peach, and persimmon brandy were also distilled here, and these fruit brandies are probably the spirits that Washington and his guests drank.

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Grazefest Alabama, September 11-12, 2004

The SFA is serving as curator of pitmasters for Pasture to the Pit, an exposition and barbecue feed to be held September 11 - 12 at Garrett Coliseum in Montgomery. Take a look at www.eatingfresh.com for details. On that Sunday, five Deep South pitmasters – including Van Sykes of Bob Sykes Bar-B-Q (Bessemer, AL) Chris Lilly of Big Bob Gibson Bar-B-Q (Decatur, AL) and Leatha Jackson of Leatha's Bar-B-Que Inn (Hattiesburg, MS) – will smoke heirloom varieties of pasture-raised pork. Lucky eaters will judge whether the resulting barbecue is better.

SFA Symposium Focuses upon Race Relations

The seventh annual Southern Foodways Symposium will be held October 7-10, 2004. This year we explore race through the lens of foodways. We will study, debate, and celebrate the South's shared food culture by way of events that focus upon race relations. SFA believes that racial chasms can be bridged when we recognize our common humanity across a table piled high with bowls of collard greens, platters of cornbread. We believe that food is our region's greatest shared creation. And we see food as a unifier in a diverse region, as a means by which we may address the issues that have long vexed our homeland.

➤ GRAVY ◀

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New Southern Cooking Nathalie Dupree's Southern Memories

By Nathalie Dupree
Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004; \$24.95 and \$19.95 respectively.



The University of Georgia Press has reissued two of Nathalie Dupree's classic Southern cookbooks in handsome paperback editions. Well before the advent of the Food Network, when cooking shows were just starting to gain popularity on public television, Nathalie Dupree shared sacred air space with the likes of Julia Child and Madeleine Kamman, preaching about new Southern food. It was a mingling of traditional Southern foods with contemporary adaptations, like Old-style Pimento Cheese Spread and a prize-winning \$6,000 Yogurt Grits Rolled Soufflé.

I watched Nathalie's show many times. *New Southern Cooking*, the companion to her original television series, brings back many memories: Of the Turnip Green and Tomato Sauce Soufflé Roll, beautifully presented on a pretty china platter. Of the Turkey Scaloppine with Mustard and Marjoram, the Ginger Peach Omelet, the Potatoes and Green Beans Vinaigrette, the Fried Green Tomatoes, the Country Captain, the Homemade Sausage, and one of my favorites, the Pecan Tassies. I even bought a special tool to make the Tassies.

Nathalie Dupree's Southern Memories, originally published in 1993, is a coffee-table-style book, with chapters devoted to themes like Sunday Family Dinner and Hot Weather Food. One of the best things about this book is the recipe for Spring Garden Cake, which was actually the Daffodil Cake featured on the original show. Nathalie says that was the most popular cake from the show, but the recipe didn't appear in *New Southern Cooking*. I wrote to request that recipe, so I'm sure many fans will be happy to see it here.

—Karen Cathey

Sweet Stuff: Karen Barker's American Desserts

By Karen Barker
Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004; \$29.95.



Karen Barker was born in Brooklyn, but if her previous book, *Not Afraid of Flavor: Recipes from Magnolia Grill*, written with her husband, Ben Barker, didn't secure her position as a honorary Southerner, her new one certainly will. Although in *Sweet Stuff* Barker does not limit herself to Southern desserts, her long residence in the South means that she takes full advantage of the region's favorite ingredients and combinations of flavors. It's hard not to put a book that contains recipes for Bourbon Peach Cobbler with Cornmeal Cream Biscuits, Banana Pudding Cream Puffs, and Black Walnut Angel Food Cake with Sorghum Syrup on the shelf with the other Southern cookbooks.

Even though Karen Barker cooks in a restaurant kitchen, *Sweet Stuff* is a book for home cooks, both experienced bakers and beginners. Her discussions of techniques, ingredients, and basic recipes, combined with her clear instructions and the book's beautiful photographs, will inspire bakers to new levels of ambition. "One of my goals is to encourage you to bake more at home," she says in the introduction, and I can hardly wait for the peaches to come in so I can try that cobbler.

—Thomas Head

Moonshine: *Distillation of a Spirit*

*Once Revenuers climbed old Rocky Top
Looking for a moonshine still.
Ain't no Revenuers come down from Rocky Top,
Guess they never will.*

The little roads near Newport, Tennessee, wind around the mountains like coiled snakes. It's rugged, rocky country, with independent, proud inhabitants, many of whom still struggle to scratch out a living. Mountain folks' self-reliance turned to free enterprise back in the 1930s, when, ironically, Prohibition made moonshining a booming cottage industry.

"Everybody used to make it back then," says Jack Rector, a longtime observer of moonshine culture who lives in a neat white house a view of English Mountain looming out his window. Like tobacco, shine was (and is) a cash crop that helps buy shoes and food in hard times. Although he says he's never made it, "My whole family did," including his father, an uncle who served 12 years in prison, and a friend who served 18. Although there are a few small-time stills operating in the area, the business long ago turned big. He's saved a laminated copy of the *Cocke County Banner's* 1973 front-page edition chronicling the bust of a 15,227-gallon underground still, completely hidden beneath a barn. Today, Rector says big-time operators use gas-pump-style nozzles to fill tanker trucks with the stuff, which are then shipped to Baltimore, Chicago—"even Los Angeles," he says. Once a felony, making moonshine is now just a misdemeanor.

However, Rector, 68, remembers when making shine was a highly risky family operation, with every little boy a lookout. "It would be the kids' job to hide the bottles, in haystacks, or in the barn, or the smokehouse, and to go get it when somebody wanted some," he says. In those days, moonshine often served a medicinal purpose. He says doctors would write a note to the sheriff, asking him to give a patient some confiscated evidence to treat arthritis and rheumatiz. To make it more palatable, "The sheriff would dump a box of powdered sugar in it, and give it to him," Rector says.

Powdered sugar is just one recipe—it's still often mixed half-and-half with maraschino cherries, apples, peaches, grapes, or horehound or rock candy. One variety is colored with caramel, "to make it look more like scotch or whisky," says Rector. But no one really drinks shine, or white lightning or "sblow," as he's heard it called, for the exquisite flavor. "Oh honey," he says. "For all the years I've drank it, I don't think I've ever had any that tasted good." After all, when you're dealing with a beverage that could leave you blind, crippled, or dead, safety is more important. Shiners earned good reputations for being careful and avoiding lead pipes, among other concerns. To Rector, the mark of good moonshine is when "you can feel it tingle all across your chest, and down your arms. Kind of like Nyquil," he says. A sip of the cherry-flavored homebrew lights a cheery fire just beneath the sternum.

Moonshine fathered traditions both helpful and harmful. Wily Shine runners and their souped-up cars (memorialized in Robert Mitchum's *Thunder Road*) ushered in stock car racing and NASCAR. Payoffs to the law and Revenuers (IRS agents, after the lost tax revenues from homemade liquor) paved the way for the next generation's pot farms and meth labs.

Rector remembers a more innocent time, when curiosity would get the best of him and his young friends, and occasionally they'd try some of the family's hidden cache. "There'd be the drunkest little boys you ever saw, falling all over the yard," he says, shaking his head. Once they got so deathly ill, his mother took them all to the doctor. "I told her she should have wore us out," he says. "She said, I couldn't. You'uns was just too pitiful."

Today, moonshine, like everything else, is becoming more expensive, up from \$30-\$40 for a box of a dozen quart Mason jars, to \$70-\$80. (Individual bottles go for around \$10.) "It's going up as much as milk or gasoline," says Rector with mock wonder. But as long as there's profit in homebrew, it will continue to be an honored local tradition.

—Krista Reese

The Soul of Southern Cooking: *Mi Tierra Café and Bakery, San Antonio*

A couple of years ago, a group of food writers were eating a late breakfast at San Antonio's landmark Mi Tierra Café and Bakery. They weren't surprised to see the usual Tex-Mex dishes like huevos rancheros or chorizo con huevo on the menu.

But what really caught everyone's attention (especially those from out of state) were lengua de res, the beef tongue breakfast taco; carne de puerco en chile cascabel, pork tips in red sauce served with scrambled eggs; and barbacoa mexicana, a Mexican-style beef barbecue that's featured in a couple of breakfast plates.

Mi Tierra is that kind of place, and has been for more than 60 years—ever since it opened as a three-table storefront in the city's El Mercado west of downtown. This is both one

of its charms and a source of grumbling among many San Antonians, who seem to take the family-owned, three-generation, 24-hour, 500-seat restaurant for granted. Ask some of them about it, and they'll say it's overrun by tourists or that it's too busy or that it's only for college students who want breakfast at two in the morning.

Which is their loss. San Antonio has changed dramatically over the past decade, and urban sprawl, with its strip centers, fast food and chain restaurants, has hit the city especially hard. Mi Tierra, though, is an example of an older, more distinctive San Antonio, and deserves the benefit of the doubt if only for that.

—Jeff Siegel

Grocery Shopping in the Big Easy

by Jeff Siegel

The news in the spring that one of the country's biggest grocery store chains was leaving the New Orleans market would ordinarily cause all sorts of hand wringing and teeth gnashing. After all, it's not good news when yet another grocer abandons yet another American city.

But New Orleans is not just another city, and Albertson's failure there says as much about New Orleanians' good taste as it does about the politics and economics of the grocery store business. In an industry where local and regional chains, let alone Mom and Pop stores, have almost vanished, New Orleans still has plenty of both. In fact, according to census bureau figures, Louisiana has 2 percent of the grocery stores in the United States, but only 1.5 percent of the population.

"What you have in New Orleans is a unique situation," says Dan Graham, who works for the Dechert-Hampe consultancy in Los Angeles. "You have a culture that takes food and cooking and cooking at home much more seriously than elsewhere in the country. Plus, you have an ethnic population, which the big chains don't know how to deal with. They want to sell to the big middle, and that's just not New Orleans."

Hence not just several of the biggest national chains, but local chains like Rouse's and Dorignac's, plus independents

like Langenstein's, Zuppardo's, Breaux Mart, and Rob ert Fresh Markets. These stores are much more than 60,000 square feet of microwavable meals, photo finishing, and a floral department. After all, what does Wal-Mart know about boiling crawfish?

Many stores not only stock local products, such as Louisiana grown Zatarain's rice and Camellia beans (not just the traditional red beans, but everything from lentils to black beans), but regional specialties such as locally grown Creole tomatoes, Creole cream cheese (a farmer-style cheese that is a cross between cottage cheese and sour cream), and tarte   la bouille, a Cajun-style egg custard. Rouse's, for instance, lets local shrimpers sell their product in its parking lots at some stores one weekend a month.

It's probably also significant that going to the grocery store remains, for many New Orleanians, a social outing. It's not unusual, especially in some of the older neighborhoods, for the same people to be there at the same time, visiting with the same people they have seen for decades. Some of this attraction may well be the plate lunch, a fixture in local grocery stores. Stop by and pick up white beans and rice or barbecued chicken, say hello to some pals, and buy a gallon of milk. Sure beats driving to the mall.

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