

WELL VERSED, WELL FED

Lawrence Weeks honors Nikki Giovanni

BY LORA SMITH

“WHATEVER YOU DO, DON’T REMEMBER your poems. If you remember your poems you’ll try to make sure you don’t contradict yourself. If you are not willing to contradict yourself, you will spoil whatever creativity you have, because you’ll always be trying to balance. So just forget it and go on.” Nikki Giovanni, one of the most beloved poets to emerge from Appalachia, spoke those words at the forty-first annual Appalachian Writers’ Workshop at the Hindman Settlement School in July.

We might say something similar about meals. And about the texts that accompany those meals. That’s what a menu is: a text that complements a meal, words that add detail and context and narrative.

Between poems, Giovanni declared that we mountain folk were “the nicest white people in America.” Maybe the black Appalachian woman onstage wearing shiny, sherbet-green oxfords

was playing to the room. I know she wasn’t pandering.

Her talk was pointed, political, and included a memorable suggestion that male reproductive organs are now evolutionarily obsolete and should be removed, “like tonsils.” Tonsil-less novelist Robert Gipe leaned over and whispered in my ear, “I’m going to need more ice cream this time.”

To honor Giovanni’s visit, chef Lawrence Weeks cooked dinner. Drawing inspiration from the food in her poetry and his taste memories, Weeks proved a storyteller, too. He recalled, “My grandmother always made hot water cornbread and candied yams. When you got a plate, the cornbread was next to the yams and the cornbread had butter on it. At the end of the meal you’d suck up all the butter and syrup from the yams.” And he served hot water cornbread with candied yam butter.

Photos by Liz Terry

The poet Nikki Giovanni serves herself a dinner cooked in her honor at Hindman Settlement School.



Chef Lawrence Weeks prepares shaved catfish torchons.
OPPOSITE: Hindman Settlement School in Hindman, KY.



Weeks identifies as Creole, Cajun, and Affrilachian with family roots that unfurl across Kentucky, Louisiana, and Texas. His cooking is an attempt to marry those experiences and cultures. To explain, he cooked a whole hog with apple-sorghum jus and cracklins.

“We smoked it. Pulled off all the meat. Took the skin that was left and smoked it again for several hours. We then popped the skin in the oven to make it puffy and crispy. We chopped it up with the meat so there was a textural contrast.”

He served okra, tomato, and cucumber salad with flowers, reasoning that the acid would cut “through all the starch of cornbread, the fat of the hog. I picked the flowers that morning from Hindman’s farm. You eat meat and then you eat a pickle to refresh yourself.”

His food was thoughtful and simple and rich with contradictions. Restraint and reverence for ingredients balanced a want to show off with a dish like shaved catfish with fermented hot sauce, tartar sauce, and collard slaw.

“We sprinkled the catfish with transglutaminase and rolled it like a torchon,” Weeks wrote, speaking the language of molecular gastronomists. “I see cooking that gets overly manicured to be only about technique. I’d rather someone

know they’re eating catfish and collards and have that elicit a memory.” It’s a flight of fancy, he said, but “the idea of the dish in the end was shaved catfish with hot sauce and a side of slaw.”

The willingness to deviate from tradition and history made room for invented dishes that retell the overlapping African, Acadian, and Appalachian diasporas. That’s how Weeks came to serve sour corn maque choux. Virginia chef Travis Milton introduced him to sour corn. “I thought the flavor was nice, and it almost smelled like whiskey,” Weeks said. “It was natural to take the corn, ferment it, and add it back into the maque choux.”

Miner potatoes, the last dish on his menu, referenced the labor history of the region. “We took the skins from onions and all the tops from everything that we were using. Burned them. Mixed them with salt. We tossed the potatoes in the onion ash until they came out black. If you eat them with your hands, you get charcoal on your fingers that resembles coal dust on men coming out of the mines.”

Giovanni’s poetry and Weeks’ food entwined that night. They were invitations to let go of what we’d done before and go on. The poet seemed pleased with dinner. It’s unclear whether she will remember the menu. 🍷

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