Mississippi Folklife

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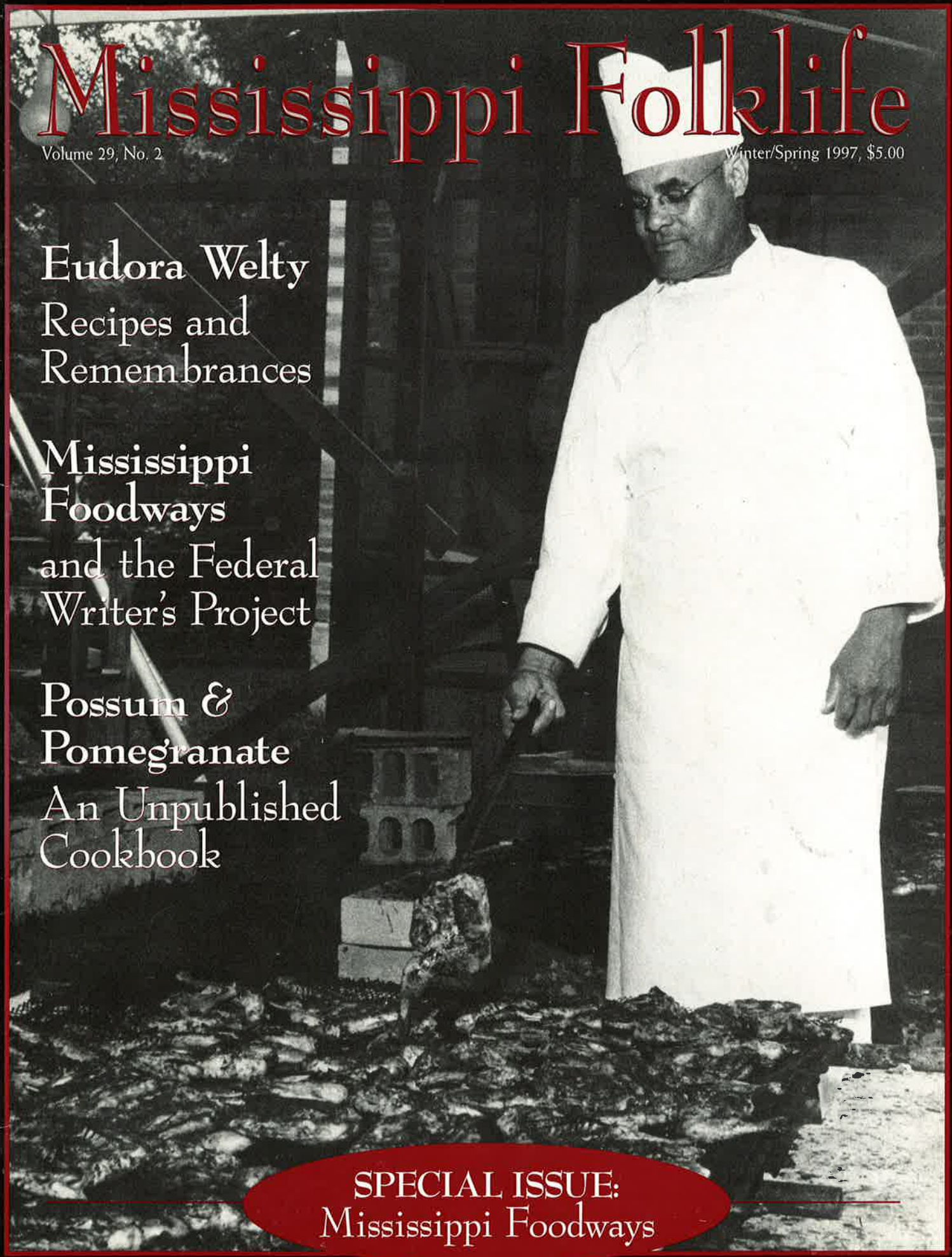

Eudora Welty
Recipes and Remembrances

Mississippi Foodways
and the Federal Writer's Project

Possum & Pomegranate
An Unpublished Cookbook

SPECIAL ISSUE:
Mississippi Foodways

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Cover photo: Chef Norman Burke at the grill. Photo courtesy of the Delta Council.

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Editor's Note

ON MORE THAN ONE OCCASION IN THIS COLUMN I have expressed my desire to publish special issues on particular topics of traditional Mississippi culture. Special topic issues offer a number of advantages, most importantly the opportunity to give in-depth treatment to particular themes and cultural patterns. Over a year ago John T. Edge, a graduate student in Southern Studies here at the University of Mississippi, and I discussed the possibility of a devoting an issue to the food culture of this state. This issue of *Mississippi Folklife* is the result of those discussions and the collaborations that followed.

While researching Delta folksong traditions in the collections of the Federal Writer's Project at the Department of Archives and History in Jackson I stumbled across more than a few files of manuscript material on traditional foodways. The largest volume of material was from the "Mississippi Eats" project, Mississippi's part of the Depression era "American Eats" project. I also discovered a remarkable unpublished cookbook manuscript titled "Possum and Pomegranate," which offers a plethora of recipes with little or no cultural description or context. While the sum of the Federal Writer's Project food materials were probably never intended to appear together, we hope to give a glimpse here of the richness, diversity, and continuity of food culture in 1930s and 40s Mississippi.

A number of people made important contributions to this issue. Angela Griffin transcribed and typed many of the original manuscripts, and Karen Glynn, Associate Editor and Assistant Director of our Southern Media Archive, offered her wise perspective on photographs. Sarah Torian, now a member of the staff of the Southern Regional Council in Atlanta, steadily guided this issue through the many stages of production. And, finally, John T. Edge, who arrived in Oxford with a thirst for the study of the American South and soon developed an even more insatiable hunger for the study of southern foodways, served as Guest Editor. In this role he has offered a wide view of contemporary approaches to the study of foodways while diligently working on all phases of this issue. My appreciation goes out to all of them.

I would be remiss without also thanking the many people who worked on the Federal Writer's Project foodways assignments in the 1930s and 1940s, and equally as important are the library staff at Archives and History in Jackson who have catalogued and preserved the many manuscript pages, making them accessible to the public.

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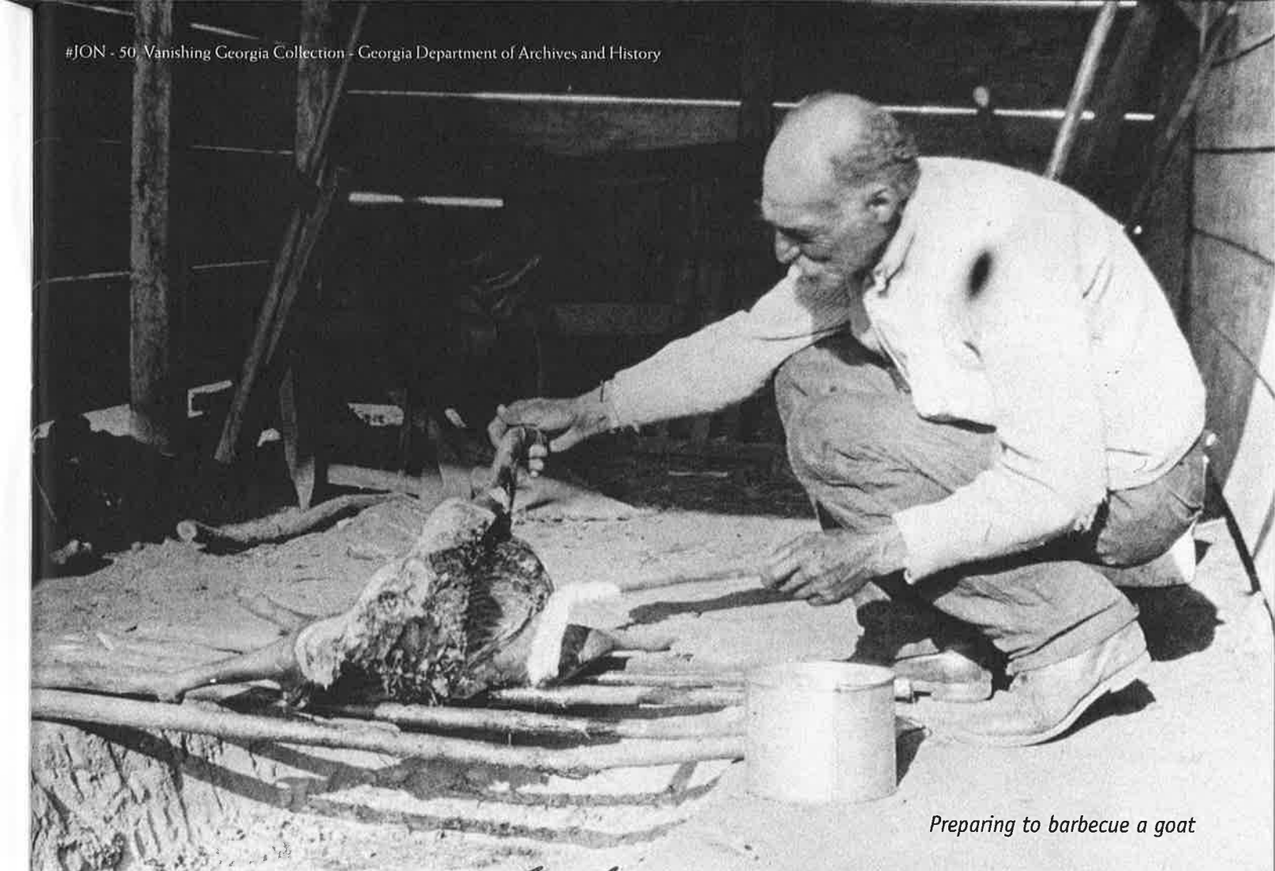


#JON - 50, Vanishing Georgia Collection - Georgia Department of Archives and History

Preparing to barbecue a goat

an introduction

Mississippi Eats

by John T. Edge

BETWEEN JULY OF 1935 AND JUNE OF 1942, the federal government employed hundreds of white collar workers as folklore fieldworkers. First conceived as a means of work relief for unemployed writers and journalists, the Federal Writers' Project, along with sister projects devoted to the arts, theater and music, was an integral part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal programs.

Though most often recognized for the authorship of state guidebooks like *Mississippi: A Guide to the Magnolia State,*[1] the Federal Writers' Project also undertook a variety of lesser known but equally ambitious projects. One of these projects was a book-length survey of American foodways, initially slated for publication in 1942.

To be titled *America Eats* and edited by Louisiana writer Lyle Saxon, the book was intended as "an account of group

eating as an important American social institution; [and] its part in development of American cookery as an authentic art...."[2] The scope of the book was to be national, yet the emphasis was to be regional, even local: "The proposed book will consist of...[f] ive sections covering the country by regions. Each section to consist of an essay on the development of cookery within the region and on the numerous social gatherings at which eating is an important social part of the program, with emphasis on dishes and methods of cooking characteristic of the locality..."[3]

Unprecedented in their concentration upon "food events,"[4] the project's developers discouraged the compiling of recipes out of context, instead encouraging writers to compile remembrances and participant observations of "family reunions, political barbecues, fish fries, box supper social, coon hunt suppers, cemetery cleaning picnic, chittlin feast at hog-killin' time," among others.[5]

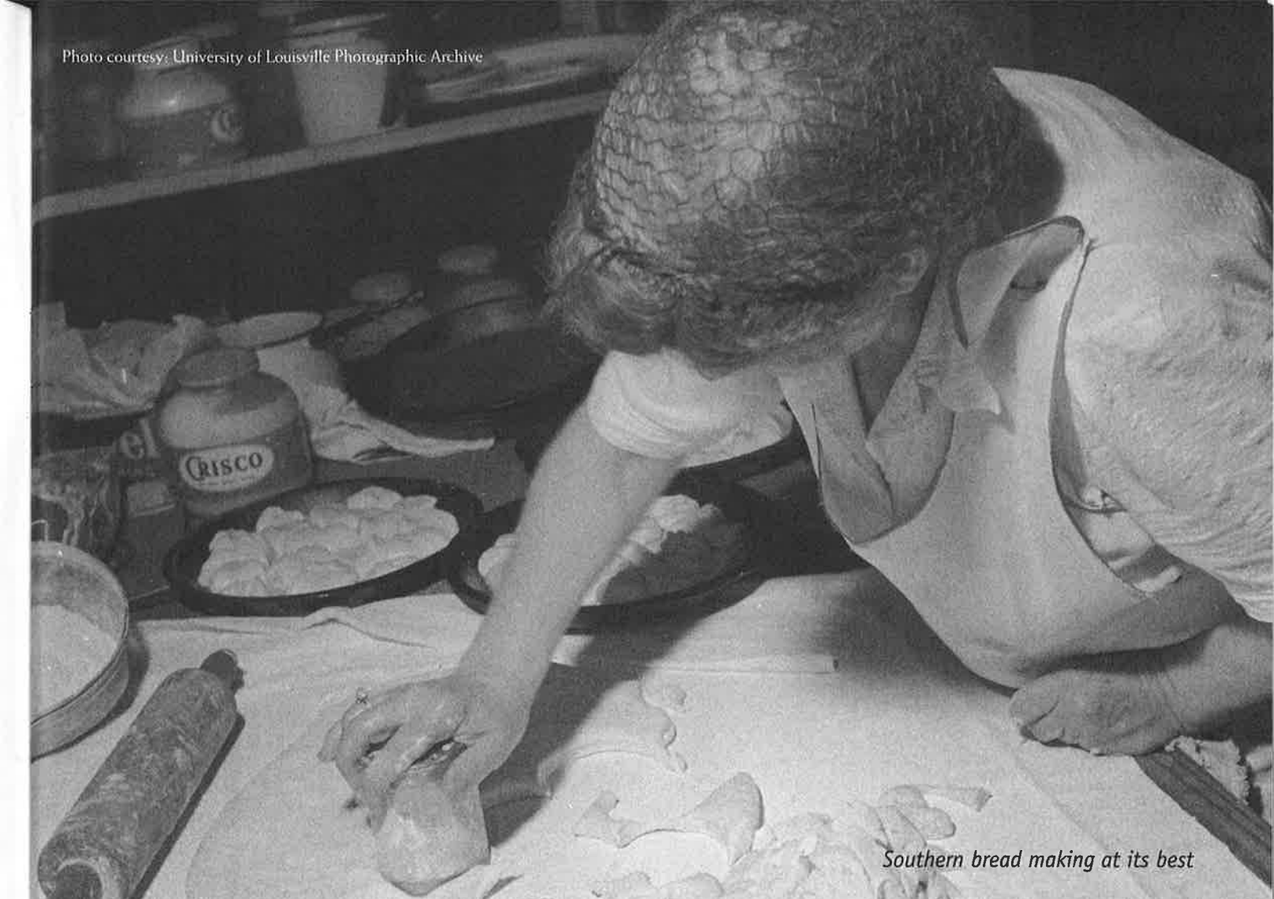
Operating under individual state control since September of 1939, the work was subsumed by projects perceived to be more profoundly related to military endeavors. By late 1941, in an attempt to insure continued funding, the project had taken on a patriotic, nationalist tone: "If the book has a basic purpose it is to make people appreciate a much-neglected aspect of our culture, the American table, as much as few expatriates do the French. If we can make Americans realize that they have the best table in the world we shall have helped to deepen national patriotism."[6]

Ultimately, such efforts at redirection proved unsuccessful; editorial work on the *America Eats* project was fully disbanded in February of 1942. Though a thorough accounting of the project output is difficult to ascertain, folklorist Charles Camp catalogued 400 plus entries from thirty-seven states on file at the Library of Congress.[7] Of those, eighteen entries were from the state of Mississippi.

While Camp's work centered upon items on file in Washington, D.C., comparable, and in some cases more extensive, materials were also deposited at state and university archives across the United States. Squirreled away in the Mississippi State Archives since the premature end of the *America Eats* project in 1942, the essays that comprise the bulk of this issue of **Mississippi Folklife** have, heretofore, never been published.

Rather than a mere eighteen essays, the Mississippi State Archives offered up a treasure trove of three-hundred plus pages of foodways and food events documentation, including an unpublished Eudora Welty manuscript, a cookbook of locally compiled recipes entitled "Possum and Pomegranate," and numerous essays dedicated to "food events" like barbecues and fish fries. Of the latter, there are many versions, enough, in fact, for a magazine article of some length and thematic unity. In an effort to further contextualize the food events depicted herein, descriptions of more contemporary food events are also included. MF

[1]Federal Writers' Project. *Mississippi: A Guide to the Magnolia State* NY.: Hastings House, 1938.
[2]"Brief Description of Proposed Book" on file at the Mississippi State Archives, Jackson, Mississippi, undated.
[3]Memorandum on file at the Mississippi State Archives, Jackson, Mississippi, undated.
[4]A term I borrow from: Charles Camp *America Eats: Toward a Social Definition of American Foodways* University of Pennsylvania, Ph.D., 1978.
[5]Excerpts from entry entitled "The South Eats" from "Tentative Table of Contents" on file at the Mississippi State Archives, Jackson, Mississippi.
[6]Katherine Kellock, editorial report on file at the Mississippi State Archives, Jackson, Mississippi, undated.
[7]ibid.



Southern bread making at its best

Mississippi Recipes

Traditional

Eudora Welty
circa 1935-1942

Mississippi writer Eudora Welty compiled the following recipes for the Mississippi Advertising Commission during her time as a WPA employee. Along with the recipes she presents the sources, traditions, myths, and meanings of the Mississippi foods.

— Sarah E. Torian

STARK YOUNG, IN HIS BOOK *Feliciana*, tells how a proud and lovely Southern lady, famous for her dinner table and for her closely-guarded recipes, temporarily forgot how a certain dish was prepared. She asked her Creole cook, whom she herself had taught, for the recipe. The cook wouldn't give it back.

Still highly revered, recipes in the South are no longer quite so literally guarded. Generosity has touched the art of cooking, and now and then, it is said, a Southern lady will give another Southern lady her favorite recipe and even include all the ingredients, down to that magical little touch that makes all the difference.

In the following recipes, gleaned from ante-bellum homes in various parts of Mississippi, nothing is held back. That is guaranteed. Yankees are welcome to make these dishes. Follow the directions and success is assured.

Port Gibson, Mississippi, which General Grant on one occasion declared was "too beautiful to burn," is the source of a group of noble old recipes. "Too beautiful to burn," by far are the jellied apples which Mrs. Herschel D. Brownlee makes. The recipe for them is as follows:

Jellied Apples

Pare and core one dozen apples of a variety which will jell successfully. Winesap and Jonathan are both good.

To each dozen apples moisten well two and one-half cups of sugar. Allow this to boil for about five minutes. Then immerse apples in this syrup, allowing plenty of room about each apple. Add the juice of one-half lemon, cover closely, and allow to cook slowly until apples appear somewhat clear. Close watching and frequent turning is necessary to prevent them from falling apart.

Remove from stove and fill centers with a mixture of chopped raisins, pecans, and crystallized ginger, the latter adding very much to the flavor of the finished dish. Sprinkle each apple with granulated sugar and baste several times with the thickening syrup, then place in a 350-degree oven to glaze without cover on vessel. Baste several times during this last process.

Mrs. Brownlee stuffs eggs with spinach and serves with a special sauce, the effect of which is amazingly good. Here is the secret revealed:

Stuffed Eggs

12 eggs
1 1b. can of spinach or equal amount of fresh spinach
1 small onion cut fine
salt & pepper to taste
juice of 1 lemon or 1/2 cup vinegar
1/2 cup melted butter or oil
1 large can mushroom soup

Boil eggs hard, peel, and cut lengthwise. Mash yolks fine. Add butter, seasoning, and spinach. Stuff each half egg, press together, and pour over them mushroom soup thickened with cornstarch, and chopped pimento for color.

Last of all, Mrs. Brownlee gives us this old recipe for lye hominy, which will awaken many a fond memory in the hearts of ex-patriot Southerners living far, far away.

Lye Hominy

1 gallon shelled corn
1/2 quart oak ashes
salt to taste

Boil corn about three hours, or until the husk comes off, with oak ashes which must be tied in a bag — a small sugar sack will answer. Then wash in three waters. Cook a second time about four hours, or until tender. An all day job, adds Mrs. Brownlee.

One of the things Southerners do on plantations is give big barbecues. For miles around, "Alinda Gables," a plantation in the Delta near Greenwood, is right well spoken of for its barbecued chicken and spare ribs.

Here Mr. and Mrs. Allen Hobbs, of "Alinda Gables," tell you what to do with every three-pound chicken you mean to barbecue:

Barbecue Sauce

1 pint Wesson oil
2 pounds butter
5 bottles barbecue sauce (3 1/2 ounce bottles)
1/2 pint vinegar
1 cup lemon juice
2 bottles tomato catsup (14 ounce bottles)
1 bottle Worchester Sauce (10 ounce bottles)
1 tablespoon tabasco sauce
2 buttons garlic, chopped fine
salt and pepper to taste

This will barbecue eight chickens weighing from 2 1/2 to 3 pounds. In barbecuing, says Mrs. Hobbs, keep a slow fire and have live coals to add during the process of cooking, which takes about two hours. The secret lies in the slow cooking and the constant mopping of the meat with the sauce. Keep the chickens wet at all times and turn often. If hotter sauce is desired, add red pepper and more tabasco sauce.

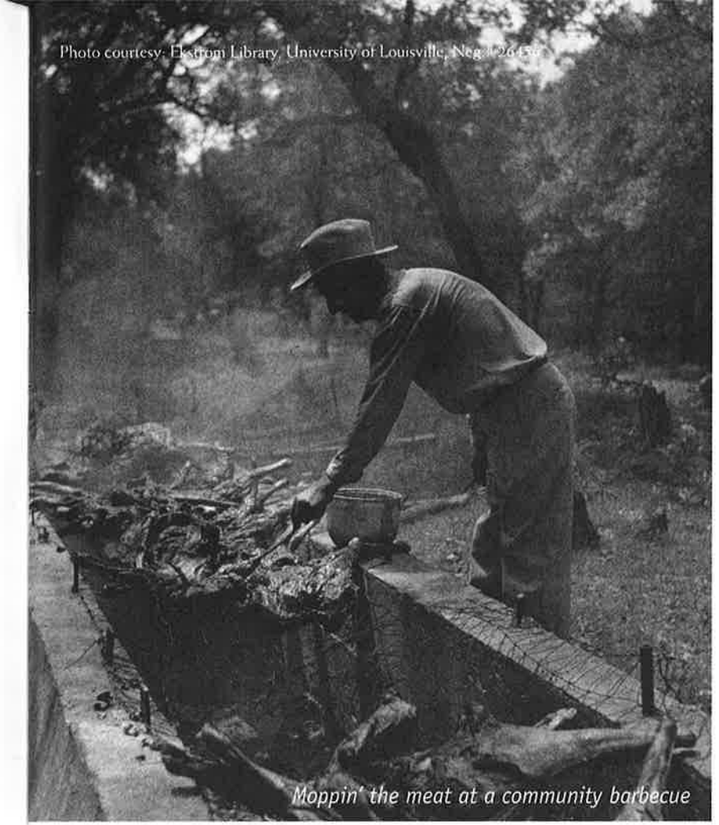


Photo courtesy: Ekstrom Library, University of Louisville, Neg. #26-5a

Moppin' the meat at a community barbecue

Mrs. James Milton Acker, whose home, "The Magnolias," in north Mississippi is equally famous for barbecue parties under the magnificent magnolia trees on the lawn, gives a recipe which is simpler and equally delightful:

Barbecue Sauce

4 ounces vinegar
14 ounces catsup
3 ounces Worchester Sauce
2 tablespoons salt
red and black pepper to taste
4 ounces butter

Heat together: 4 ounces vinegar, 14 ounces catsup, 3 ounces Worchester Sauce, the juice of one lemon, 2 tablespoons salt, red and black pepper to taste, and 4 ounces butter. Baste the meat constantly while cooking.

Pass Christian, Mississippi, an ancient resort where the most brilliant society of the eighteenth century used to gather during the season, is awakened each morning by the familiar cry, "Oyster ma-an from Pass Christi-a-an!" It would take everything the oyster man had to prepare this seafood gumbo as the chef at Inn-by-the-Sea, Pass Christian, orders it:

Sea Food Gumbo

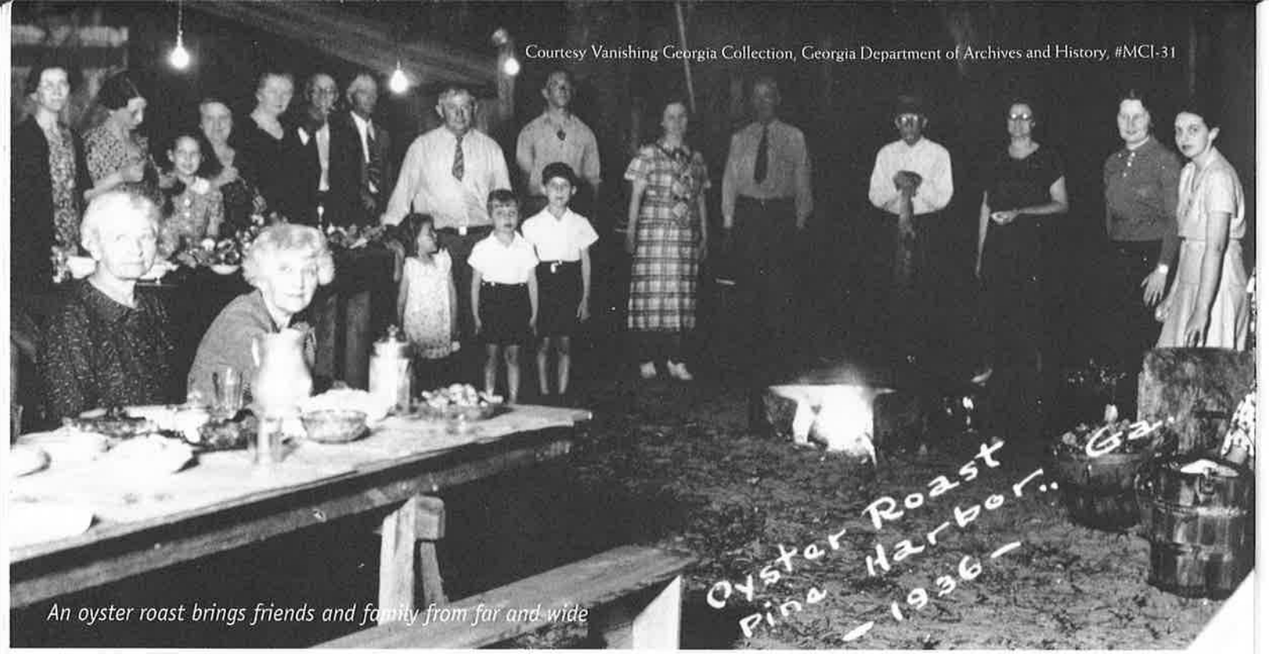
2 qts. okra, sliced
2 large green peppers
1 large stalk celery
6 medium sized onions
1 bunch parsley
1/2 quart diced ham
2 cans #2 tomatoes
2 cans tomato paste
3 pounds cleaned shrimp
2 dozen hard crabs, cleaned and broken into bits
100 oysters and juice
1/2 cup bacon drippings
1 cup flour
small bundle of bay leaf and thyme
salt and pepper to taste
1 teaspoon Lea & Perrin's Sauce
1 1/2 gallons chicken or ham stock

Put ham in pot and smother until done. Then add sliced okra, and also celery, peppers, onions, and parsley all ground together. Cover and cook until well done. Then add tomatoes and tomato paste.

Next put in the shrimp, crabs, crab meat and oysters. Make Brown Roux of bacon dripping and flour and add to the above. Add the soup stock, and throw into pot bay leaves and thyme, salt and pepper, and Lea & Perrin's Sauce.

This makes three gallons of gumbo. Add one tablespoon of steamed rice to each serving.

The chef at Inn-by-the-Sea fries his chickens deliciously too. He uses pound or pound-and-a-half size fowls. Dressed and drawn, they are cut into halves and dipped into batter made of one slightly beaten egg to which one cup of sweet milk has been added, as well as salt and pepper. The halves of chicken are dipped and thoroughly wetted in the batter and then dredged well in dry, plain flour. The chef fries the chicken in deep hot fat until they are well done and a golden brown. He says be careful not to fry too fast.



An oyster roast brings friends and family from far and wide

Two other seafood recipes from the Mississippi Coast come out of Biloxi, that cosmopolitan city that began back in 1669, and where even today the European custom of blessing the fleet at the opening of shrimp season is ceremoniously observed. "Fish Courtboullion" is a magical name on the Coast, it is spoken in soft voice by the diner, the waiter, and the chef alike. Its recipe should be accorded the highest respect; it should be made up to the letter and without delay:

Fish Courtboullion

5 or 6 onions
1 bunch parsley
2 or 4 pieces celery
4 pieces garlic
6 small cans tomatoes
1 or 2 bay leaves
hot peppers to taste

Cut up fine, fry brown, and let simmer for about an hour, slowly. Prepare the fish, and put into the gravy. Do not stir. Cook until fish is done.

This will serve 8 to 10 people, for 10 or more double the ingredients.

To prepare fish, fry without cornmeal, and put in a plate or pan. Pour a portion of the gravy over it, and let it set for a while.

Just before serving, pour the rest of the hot gravy over the fish.

Another valuable Coast recipe which comes from Biloxi is that for Okra Gumbo.

Okra Gumbo

2 or 3 onions
1/2 bunch parsley
5 or 6 pieces celery
1 small piece garlic
4 cans of okra, or a dozen fresh pieces
1 can tomatoes
1 pound veal stew, or 1 slice raw ham

Cut all ingredients in small pieces and fry brown. Let simmer for a while. If shrimp are desired, pickle and par-boil them and add to the ingredients the shrimp and the water in which they were boiled. If oysters or crab meat is desired, add to gumbo about twenty minutes before done.

Add as much water as desired.

Aberdeen, Mississippi, is a good Southern town to find recipes. Old plantations along the Tombigbee River centered their social life in Aberdeen as far back as the 1840's, and some of the recipes that were used in those days are still being made up in this part of the country.

Mrs. C.L. Lubb, of Aberdeen, uses this recipe for beaten biscuits.

Beaten Biscuits

4 cups flour measured before sifting
3/4 cups lard
1 teaspoon salt
4 teaspoons sugar
enough ice water and milk to make a stiff dough (about 1/2 cup)

Break 150 times until the dough pops. Roll out and cut, and prick with a fork. Bake in a 400-degree oven. When biscuits are a light brown, turn off the heat and leave them in the oven with the door open until they sink well, to make them done in the middle.

Mrs. Bicknell T. Eubanks, also of Aberdeen, prepares Spanish rice this way.

Spanish Rice

4 tablespoons oil
1 cup rice
1 onion, sliced
1 green pepper, chopped
1 quart canned tomatoes
2 teaspoons salt
a little less than 1/4 teaspoon pepper

Heat two tablespoons oil in large frying pan and add rice. Cook until brown, stirring constantly. Cook remaining two tablespoons oil with onion and green pepper until the onion is yellow and tender., Combine with rice. Add tomatoes and let simmer until the rice is tender, stirring constantly. Add a little hot tomato juice if the rice seems dry. Add seasonings. Serves 6.

In the old steamboat days, Vicksburg, Mississippi's wicked wide-open town, lived high with all the trimmings. Perched on the bluffs overlooking the Mississippi, it is famous still for its excellent catfish. The disarmingly simple recipe for preparing it is here given:

Fried Catfish

1/2 pound catfish
salt and pepper
cornmeal

Take a catfish weighing 1/2 pound. Season well with salt and pepper, and roll in cornmeal. Use a pot of deep fat with temperature 360 degrees. Place the fish in the pot and fry until done. Serve very hot.

To go along with the fish, the Hotel Vicksburg serves a wickedly hot potato salad, prepared as follows:

Potato Salad

1 quart sliced potatoes (cooked)
6 pieces chopped crisp bacon
3 chopped hard-boiled eggs
1 minced large green pepper
2 minced pimentos
4 tablespoons mayonnaise
2 tablespoons prepared mustard
salt and pepper to taste

Mix and serve with quartered tomatoes, sliced dill pickles, mixed sweet pickles, and quartered onions.

A collection of recipes from the Old South is no more complete than the Old South itself without that magic ingredient, the mint julep. In the fine old city of Columbus, in the northeastern part of the state, hospitality for many years is said to have reached its height in "Whitehall," the home of Mr. and Mrs. T.C. Billups. "The drink is refreshing," says Mrs. Billups, needlessly enough, "and carries with it all the charm of the Old South when life was less strenuous than it is today, when brave men and beautiful women loved and laughed and danced the hours away. In their serious moments, which were many, they aspired to develop minds and souls that made them among the finest people this old world has known." The "Whitehall" recipe is as follows:

Mint Julep

Have silver goblet thoroughly chilled.

Take half lump sugar and dissolve in tablespoon water.
Take single leaf mint and bruise it between fingers, dropping it into dissolved sugar.
Strain after stirring.
Fill the goblet with crushed ice, to capacity.
Pour in all the bourbon whiskey the goblet will hold.
Put a sprig of mint in the top of the goblet, for bouquet.
Let goblet stand until FROSTED.
Serve rapidly.

Who could ask for anything more? MF

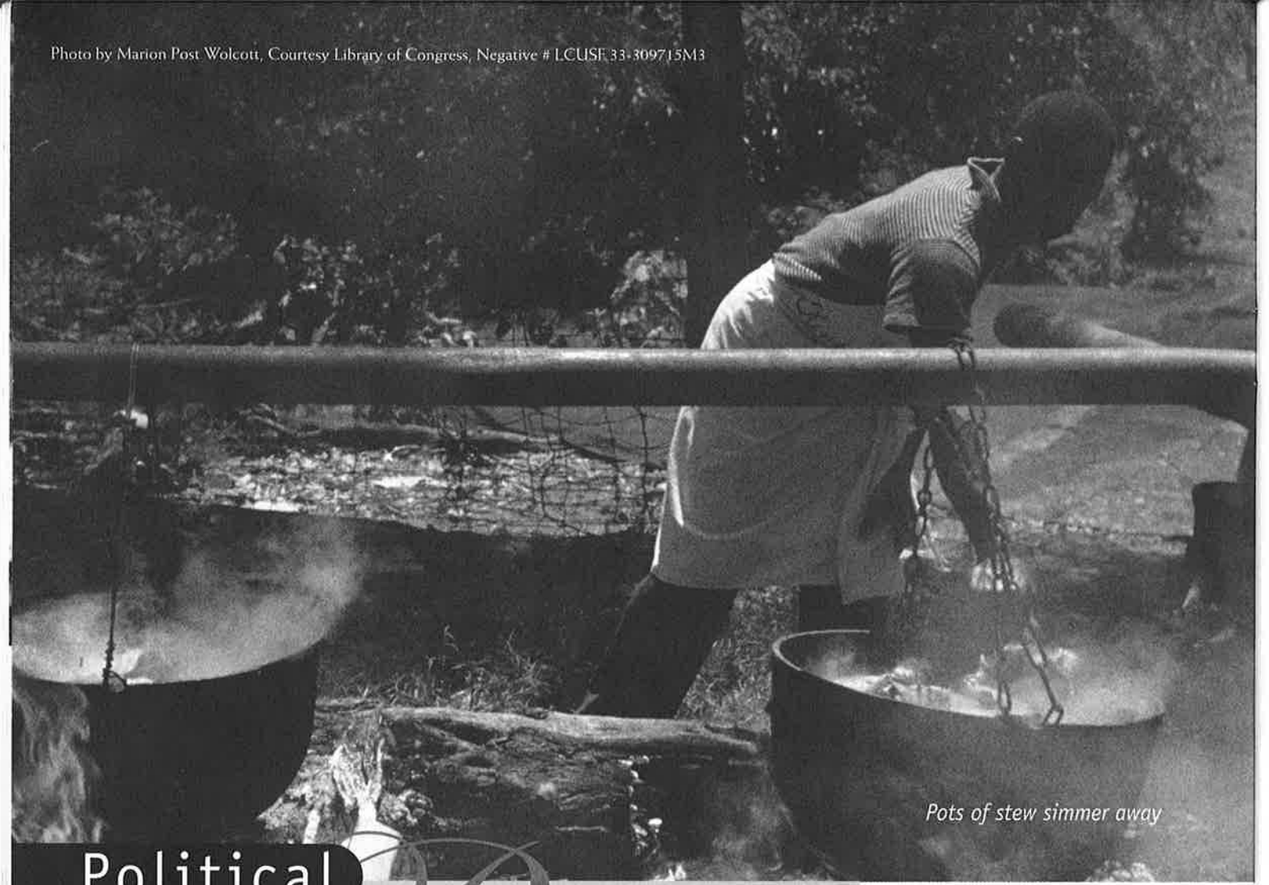


Photo by Marion Post Wolcott, Courtesy Library of Congress, Negative # LCUSF 33-309715M3

Pots of stew simmer away

Political Barbecue

Kate C. Hubbard
Circa 1935-1942

Though at times condescending, this essay conveys well the respect that Southerners accord pitmasters like "Bluebill." And, though the writer describes the meat being cooked as beef when pork was (and is) the more likely choice for a barbecue, most of the reportage is accurate and evocative.

— John T. Edge

JUST AS SURE AS taxes come due before the year is out, politics comes of age in Mississippi as fall settles down. Our crop has been made and, plow-weary as the soil itself, we take to politics like some folks take to drink. It's the only sure-fire emotional outlet we know.

An office seeker with his nose in the wind senses that this is the time to ply his trade. Being one of us he knows that the voting fruit is now growing in bunches and ready for the plucking. Aware, too, that the common run of old time picnics is as dead as last year's boll weevil, he gathers his cohorts about the conference table, calls for a pooling of resources, and schemes up a barbecue. For, voting year or not, Mississippi politics takes on the nature of an epidemic and we have come to rely on the mass eating of barbecued meat as a counter-irritant.

Even the novice candidates are invited to show what they can do, but the cook and principle speaker should be old hands, famous for miles around, for we certainly have a long way to come and the fare must be to our liking. Certainly if the candidate for high office is one of our most famous and able villifiers, and if the pit artist is Bluebill Yancy, we'll be there. Bluebill is a Negro with a head like a cypress knee. They call him blood brother to the Ugly Man, but if he's short on looks, he's long on cooking and barbecue meat is his specialty.

Bluebill and his henchmen are hard at work when we arrive on the grounds so we know that the weather, at least, is favoring the candidates. For Bluebill works according to the stages of the moon and has been known to call the whole thing off at the slightest show of thunder on cooking night. We pass the time of day with Dicey, Bluebill's wife, who isn't allowed within smelling distance of the pit until she sees Bluebill sharpen up his knives for the carving; the meat can't "breathe freely" with a woman cook around.

We pay our respects to Uncle Si Curtis who has already nailed a plank between two trees for his lemonade stand. Uncle Si is one of the best singing school leaders in the county and when he swings into "Mercy's Free," where it says "Swell, Oh swell the heavenly chorus," he can be heard as far away as the old burnt schoolhouse. Using the same technique to drum up trade for his spring-water lemonade, he leans against a trees and opens up:

"Ice cold lemonade!
Made in the shade
Stirred with a spade
Good enough for any old maid!"

Uncle Si's crowd thins out as the preliminary speaking begins. We listen to the soaring oratory with one ear and the sizzling of Bluebill's meat with the other. The beef has been cooking all night over the embers of green hickory wood and its peppery odor has had our nose twitching since we first drove up.

Bluebill's pit is a ten-footer with wire mesh stretched over a fire coaxed down to smokeless coals. We pace the pit with him on one of his endless rounds—up one side to turn the meat, down the other to baste it with mopping sauce. As the moist, brown hunks of beef approach perfection, Bluebill continues his rounds, proud as a monkey with a tin tail.

While the main speaker is warming up we move from one group of friends to another. The sonorous voice damns the tariff and the Republican party. We nod our head. He touches on the sacredness of the ballot, the virtues of Southern womanhood, and we are in accord. He promises to fight, bleed and die to keep the ship of state afloat and we say "amen."

He pauses for dramatic effect, and after mopping his perspiring brow, starts in to rant, abuse, belittle, and attack the opposition. We edge closer because this is what we came to hear. The speaker describes his opponent as a "shallow-brained, slack-jawed liar; a bull ape of Mississippi politics; a grave baboon cavorting like a fat pony in high oats." We push a bit nearer the speaker's stand, anxious to hear every word, hoping he'll let the hide go with the horns and the tallow.

"Like a parasite of the highest rank," the candidate roars, "he has been feeding from the public trough for twenty years, fattening the bosom of his trousers. It is time that the voters of this commonwealth rise up in indignation and turn him out to pasture and elevate to office men who don't jump down their throats and gallop their insides out."

Whether we agree with the speaker or not, we admit it's pretty pert language. We figure maybe he is right, but for the moment the mention of feeding has suggested something and soon we take ourselves over to the pits to see how Bluebill is getting along with the beef which has been roasting over the hickory fire for fourteen hours. Taking his cue from the orator, Bluebill dabs on more hot stuff, dressing it down with the same vigor the candidate uses on his opponent.

There is always an outsider who doesn't know any better than to ask Bluebill for his mopping sauce recipe. His answer is as evasive as it is voluble. He recites it like a grocery list: bay leaves , lemon, paprika, pickling spices, onions and garlic. To make it "good and delicious" Bluebill says go heavy on the garlic and paprika. If he is really annoyed by the questioning he will recommend the generous use of butter substitute as the base for his concoction. If only mildly so he will suggest cow butter. Catch him when things are going well in the pits, and Bluebill will admit that he, himself, uses nothing but chicken fat.

Bluebill, having made what he calls his "politeness" turns to mopping his beef, and the bewildered recipe-seeker has to listen once more to the politician who, at this time, is working up to the climax punch. In a moment he will let us have it with both fists and leave us groggy and hanging on the ropes.

Recoiling from political punches, a neighbor asks us to have a drink of his best corn liquor, and we don't care if we do. The candidates, wilted and weary from their efforts on the speakers' stand, likewise have a good stiff one back in the bushes.

Meanwhile there is a mass movement toward the long table. Dicey paddles over from the clearing and gets there just as Bluebill draws a blade across the first outside piece. Some of our own women lay off cooing at the babies and line up behind the table to make the same woman-noise over the cake and potato salad. For our part, we pass up all such trimmings. Armed with a slice of bread and a hand quicker than Bluebill's knife, we aim for the outside piece, and make it. The crowd gives way a little for the speakers to be served. After having bethumped each other with hard words, the candidates chat over their food as though it had miraculously brought them to terms. We ourselves share a dipper of spring water with a man we never liked and politics for the moment is forgotten.

Even a Mississippi man just can't keep on devouring barbecued meat and political speeches without gradually losing appetite. But we sorta have to stick around in the afternoon to hear our neighbors who are running for local office. We sit back to watch their antics and stay ready to have a good time if they work up a spat about something. Actually, what's on our minds is the need for getting along home to see about the stock. It's a far piece and we want to be there before first dark. MF

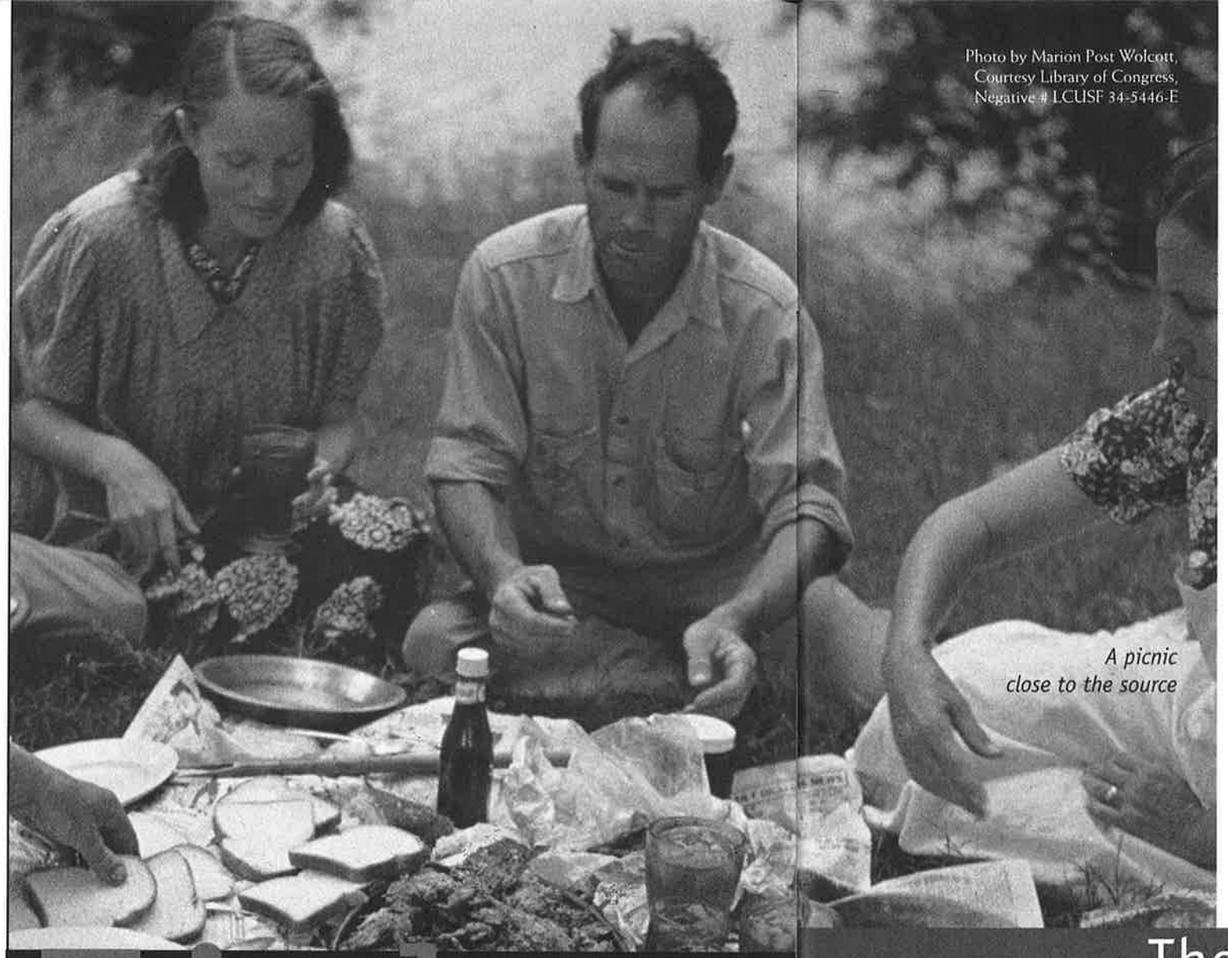


Photo by Marion Post Wolcott, Courtesy Library of Congress, Negative # LCUSF 34-5446-E

A picnic close to the source

Fish Fries

Today, when most Southerners think of a fish fry, thoughts quickly turn to the whiskered .white-fleshed catfish. However, as noted in this essay, Southerners are apt to fry any fish that is cheap and plentiful - whether it be mullet along the coast, or garfish further inland.

— John T. Edge

The South Eats

Fish Fries of the Mississippi Gulf Coast

Clarence Kerns, October 31, 1941

"EAT, EAT," HAS BEEN the watchword of fish fries everywhere. Here is no exception; piney woods and ocean air plus the instinctive occasional craving for the minerals and vitamins of seafoods, have made the fish fry a popular — but rugged — entertainment along the 88 miles of Mississippi's Gulf shore.

When did it begin? Great piles of shells, bones and artifacts at many points tell of "early-day Fish fries" centuries before discovery and settlement by white men. Among the first French explorers was one who complained his men would not be hired to work because game, and particularly fish, were so plentiful no one needed to work for a living.

Fish fries are no longer given with the frequency and rousing lustiness of the past few decades when clubs or whole neighborhoods would often hire a few fisherman with cast-nets to gather in strictly fresh mullet to be fried and eaten around drift-wood fires on the shore. But one may still see small groups of perhaps a family or two enjoying the pan fish of the coast fried on the spot.

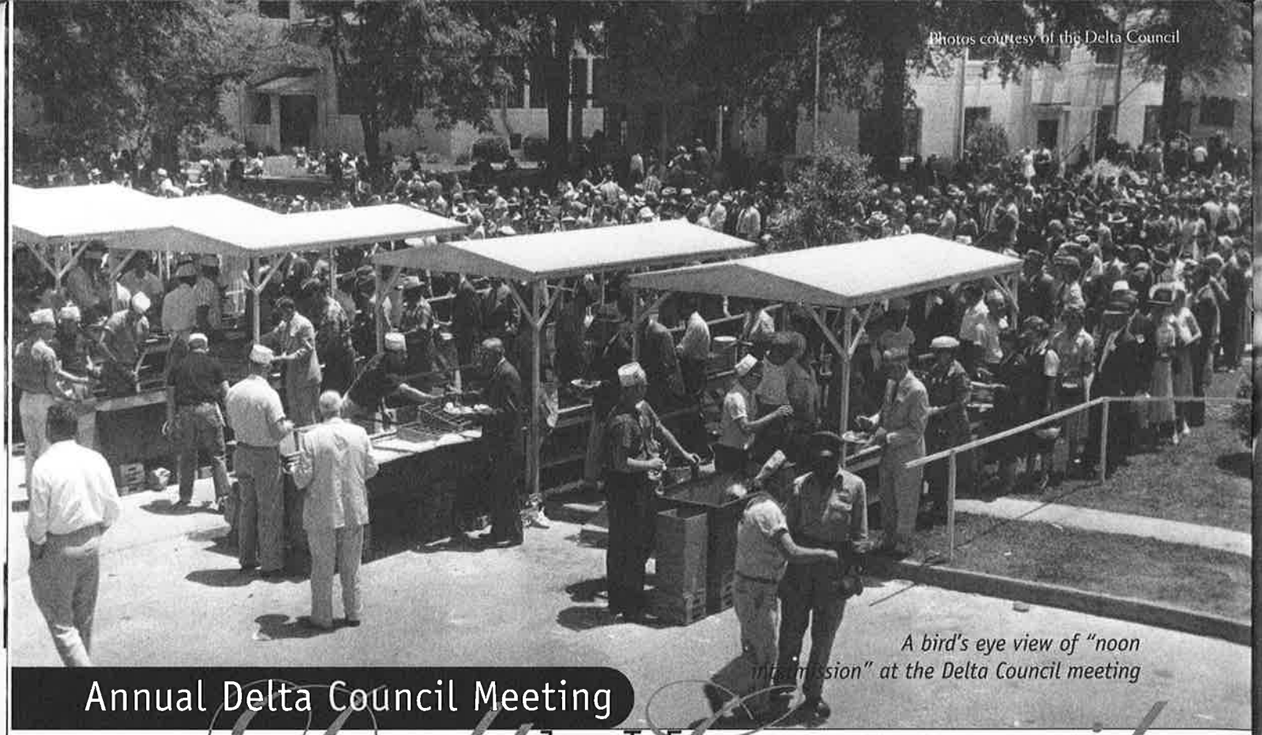
Perhaps the biggest fish fry of all time was held about a decade past as a political rally in the Capacious City Park at Gulfport. Tons of mullet and truck-loads of bread were supplied by contract. Fish by the bushel were rolled in salted meal, loaded into tub-sized wire baskets and swung by pulley into vats of seething, hot fat.

The candidates who were sponsoring the fish fry and who were to take this occasion to speak in the furtherance of their candidacy, advertised it flaunting posters and full-page ads, urging all of Harrison County's 50,000 citizens to come and bring their friends.

Magic words—especially in this depression year. Apparently all 50,000 came and apparently there were also many "friends" within traveling distance. The carefully organized crew of cooks and servers proved helplessly inadequate. Banks of bickering "guests" stood in sweltering phalanxes for as much as two hours hoping for a free fish sandwich. Very few gave up the fight—they could not for the press of people hemming them in. Most of them would not quit, spurred on by time honored American battle cries: "Never surrender," "Don't give up the ship", "Wait till you see the whites of their eyes." As true democrats, all stood on their sovereign and inalienable rights as voters to one — or more— free sandwiches, something at least to be gotten out of these prospective holders of public office.

Matters grew worse toward the heat of midday; some women fainted and there were minor injuries when city authorities came to the rescue with more and more help, which relieved the congestion.

But they still were doing business all during the afternoon while husky candidates made the woods ring with their perorations. Some folks sneaked away without paying for their sandwiches by listening to the speakers. Sandwiches and speakers were good and, we are glad to say, some of the candidates got elected. In the classic contest of the day, records never told which won out, the unlimited supply of fish or the insatiable appetites of voters. MF



Photos courtesy of the Delta Council

A bird's eye view of "noon intermission" at the Delta Council meeting

Annual Delta Council Meeting

Delta Council

BY JOHN T. EDGE

EACH MAY, members of the Delta Council (a sort of supercharged Chamber of Commerce representing eighteen counties of the Mississippi Delta) meet to discuss the Mississippi Delta region's economy. Though founded in 1935 when Mississippi was reeling from the dual effects of the "Great Flood" and the "Great Depression," this annual gathering has never been defined strictly by business dealings.

In true Delta fashion, work and play have held equal sway at these annual business convocations. Speakers ranging from Pulitzer prize winning author William Faulkner to President George Bush have graced the podium. And, a "Wear Cotton Contest" has pitted noted Deltans, one against the other, in a display of sartorial splendor. But the highlight of each meeting has long been the "noon intermission" when everyone retires to the grounds of the Delta State University campus in Cleveland for an old-fashioned Southern barbecue.

For years, Norman Burke, Delta State University Chef, acted as pitmaster for the event. Under his direction, as many as five thousand people enjoyed a feast of Lucullan proportions. During the 1959 meeting, Burke and his staff cooked over two and one-half tons of barbecue chicken along with the traditional accompaniments: potato salad, cole slaw and Coca-Cola.

Despite a reputation for hidebound ways, Deltans are not totally averse to change. Generations of Deltans had long savored the barbecue proffered by Chef Burke and his staff, yet when catfish farming began to impact the Delta economy, Delta Council annual meetings adapted to reflect the importance of the region's newest cash crop — and ironically enough, its oldest as well.

"When catfish got cranked up and Delta Pride really got rolling, everybody decided we ought to switch," says Charlie Estess, who now serves as unofficial frymaster at the annual meeting. "Now we fry catfish up in cotton seed oil. It has a mellow aroma...and lets the fish flavor come through."

Today, the traditional noon intermission is still observed. After a morning of plotting the Delta's future economic course, the crowds pile out of the conference center, clamoring for a plate of catfish and a hard won spot in the shade.

And, on a sunny afternoon in May, with all the world in bloom, the cares of the business world quickly give way to the succulent allure of freshly fried catfish filets, peppery hushpuppies and creamy cole slaw. MF

Photo © 1997, John T. Edge

Ed and Edna Scott's

Catfish

by John T. Edge

ED SCOTT just won't take no for an answer.

In the late 1970's, when catfish farming made its debut in the Mississippi Delta, Scott, a gambler by inclination and a farmer by vocation, wanted a piece of the action but, he says, "the local banks wouldn't loan money to a black man looking to grow some fish."

Having witnessed neighboring white farmers fight their way back from the brink of bankruptcy by way of aquaculture, Ed Scott was convinced of the profit to be had in pond-raised, grain-fed catfish.

So he started digging.

By the summer of 1981, Ed Scott dug eight catfish ponds into the black, loamy soil of Bolivar County, Mississippi. But, when he went looking for a bank to loan him money to stock his ponds, he was turned down — again.

Undeterred, the second-generation Delta landowner secured a government-backed loan. And in the fall of 1981, he stocked his ponds with 150,000 catfish fingerlings. Ed Scott's trials and tribulations should have ended there.

But they didn't.

For when the time came to harvest his fish, none of the local white-owned and controlled processing plants would buy what a black man had raised. So Ed Scott did what any determined (some would say stubborn) businessman might do; he built his own catfish processing plant.

By the early 1990's, Ed Scott's Pond Fresh Catfish was a raging success, employing over 30 people in the cleaning, gutting, and packaging of two million plus pounds of catfish a year. Business was so good (and the plant was so far out in the country that a quick trip to town for lunch was out of the question) that his wife Edna walked across the gravel parking lot that separates the plant from the Scott home and set up a lunchroom for the workers.

"Folks liked working for me; they liked working for another black man," he says. "But, I think what they really liked was the fried catfish my wife served to them."

Granted, compared to industry behemoths like Delta Pride, Ed Scott's production was just a drop in the pond. But his presence was not. "I think I like to worried them to death," he says with a chuckle.

Delta Pride need worry no more. Ed Scott has retired. Well, at least that is what he claims.

Nowadays, the ruddy-faced 74-year-old with the hair-trigger laugh is more likely to be found frying catfish than farming it. Like most things in the life of this singular man, it is not a task that he takes lightly.

"I first started cooking catfish when [radio station] WDIA came to Mound Bayou [Mississippi] back in 1985 to help bail them out of debt," explains Mr. Scott. "We had so many folks wanting my catfish, there like'd to have been a riot."

One taste of Mr. Scott's catfish and you will understand the urge to riot at being denied these deftly fried, pond-raised fish.

Ask him the secret of his success and he mentions nothing about his years of experience farming and processing catfish: "It's the batter," he states unequivocally. "My wife makes the finest fry mix there is. All I do is roll the fish up in it and heat up the oil."

Edna Scott accepts such compliments with aplomb.

"I've got folks who order my batter from as far away as California," she proclaims. "I mix together flour, corn meal, garlic, red pepper, lemon pepper and some other spices. It's not what you put in it that's special; it's the amount of each. We call it Edna's Original Seafood Mix."

Mrs. Scott is a quiet woman. But she is by no means shy. Empowered and emboldened by her family's experiences during the Civil Rights Movement (the Scotts took food to the Freedom Riders as they made their way through Mississippi) she is quick to speak her mind when confronted with discrimination.

Despite fans across the country and numerous attempts to market her fry mix to the wholesale trade, no grocery stores (not even the local store where Mrs. Scott buys the ingredients for the mix) sell her products. Mrs. Scott suspects that the reason has little to do with the quality of her product and a lot to do with the color of her skin. "It makes you wonder, it really does," she says wistfully.

Yet, there is no anger in her voice, only determination. She believes her fry mix will find the appreciative audience it deserves. Spend a little time looking into Edna Scott's inky black, well-deep eyes and you will be a believer too. For Edna Scott shares more with her husband than a taste for fried catfish.

Edna Scott just won't take no for an answer.

To order Edna's Original Seafood Mix, write to Mrs. Scott at Rt. 2, Box 16, Drew, MS 38737. MF

MISSISSIPPI ARTS COMMISSION

Mississippi Folklife is funded in part by the Mississippi Arts Commission and the National Endowment for the Arts.

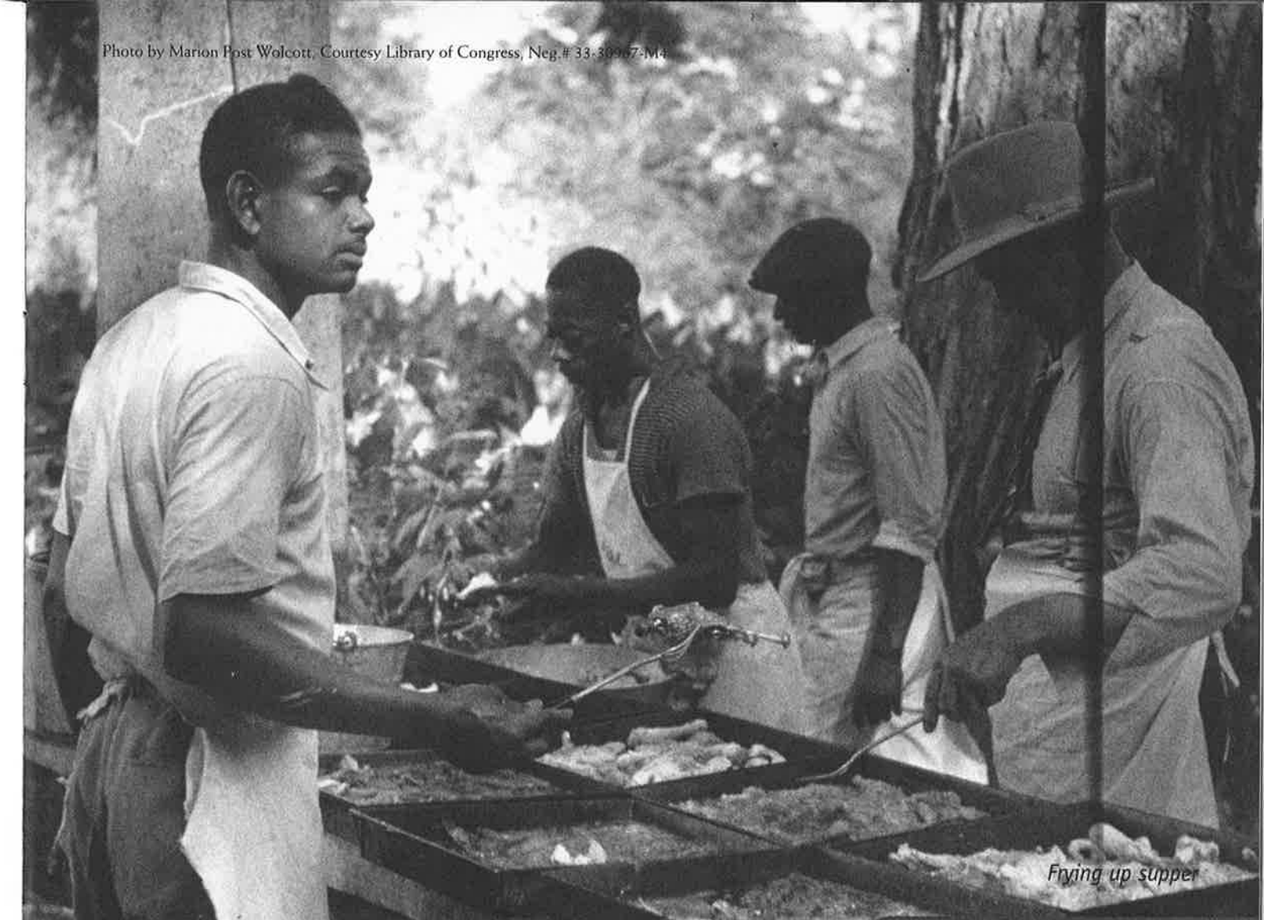


Photo by Marion Post Wolcott, Courtesy Library of Congress, Neg.# 33-30967-M4

Frying up supper

Fish Fry on The Levee

circa 1935-1942

NOW BIG EMMA was a good cook but she was regarded in most Negro quarters as a husband snatcher. Big Emma was the queen of "catfish row" in Vicksburg and she was known up and down the Mississippi River levee as the best fish frier this side of heaven.

There are marble palaces up above, they say, for the good negro who dies, but in Mississippi such birthrights could be bought at a premium with a good fish fry and nothing sought in exchange. Therefore, Big Emma was held in high regard from Memphis to New Orleans for her ability to cook catfish in spite of her frequent conquests among the men.

Big Emma was just a big black negro woman who evidently liked variety in her men. She tied to Old Sam, the bootlegger man on "Catfish Row," and the two of them plied their trade up and down the river levee. Sam, incidentally, was peg-legged and liked to be known to the negroes as "What a Man!" He is believed to have invented the short half pint of corn liquor. Sam could carry four drinks in the hollow of his wooden leg and is said to have secreted about his person four gallons at one haul.

Just as Bootleg Sam has always contended that all that is required of a successful liquor peddler along the levee is a "weak mind and strong heart," so did Big Emma place her

confidence in a big iron skillet, with plenty of grease in which to fry her river —. Big Emma always contended it was necessary to pay just as much attention to properly cooking catfish as was required in her chosen art, "husband snatching."

You can't forget your task, even for a moment, Big Emma often commented. And at fish fries such as these on the levee, the Vicksburg negro "belle" seemed to forget her men and concentrated on the meat of the fresh fish. Before hitting the skillet, Big Emma saw to it that each slice of fish was properly salted, peppered and mealed, constituting all of the pre-cooking preliminaries after the delicacy was scaled and cleaned for the deep fat frying to a golden brown.

Big Emma likewise was of the opinion that hush puppies were just as important to the meal as bread and Bootleg Sam's powerful liquor. The "big —-" of many of the levee workers cooked her hush puppies at the same time the fish was cooking. Chopped onion and minced peppers mixed with corn meal were the principle ingredients.

Big Emma, employed as a cook with one of the contractors on the levee, made it easy for Bootlegger Sam to do business with negro workers This was especially true at fish fry times when Big Emma took charge as "queen" and outside negroes were permitted to visit with levee workers. It was then, too, that the outside gamblers and "River Rats" from shanty boats were allowed a free hand in the festivities.

Fried catfish, to the Mississippi negro, deserves a place in the halls that harbor the dishes called "great" and he wants nothing better. Particularly is this true of the Mississippi River levee negro, famed of song and poem, who helped Big Emma and bootlegger Sam become among the first to profit from the contractor camps along the river.

Will Moore Early, one of the best negro hook-team drivers (those fellows who operate the "wheelers" when loads are too heavy for the dragline), was one of Bootlegger Sam's best friends, and Big Emma liked his wife Little Bit. They all became close pals, especially when a fish fry was in the making since profits were divided by all four.

Of course, Bootlegger Sam, with his cheap whiskey known up and down the river as "Stoop-Down", didn't turn in all his profit receipts. Early and Little Bit confined their activity to the sale of "two-block wine", named so because, they said, you can't drink it and walk more than two blocks. Big Emma fried the fish, purchased from the rivermen with money furnished by the commissary (store) that was operated by the levee construction contractor. The commissary was where all the trading was done "against" the wages of the men employed.

Fish fry night follows pay day in the contractor's camp that Big Emma, and the rest of the negroes, call home. It is referred to in the more "refined" camps as "supper" rather than "fry" and, as Big Emma confides, they are staged purely and solely for profit.

The contractor views the proceedings with one eye closed and the other slightly weak. It is Big Emma's night to shine and show the other levee workers just why she was named queen of "catfish row" in Vicksburg. There is always an overseer within pistol hearing distance, and if the sound of a blast is heard, all "warm-barrel" guns found on the person of the negro participants are thrown in the river.

According to Big Emma, selling her plates of catfish and hush puppies as fast as she can get them off the fire, it was too much gun fire that cost Popeye, the mule skinner, his eye when he engaged Sloppy Joe in an argument at one of the levee feasts.

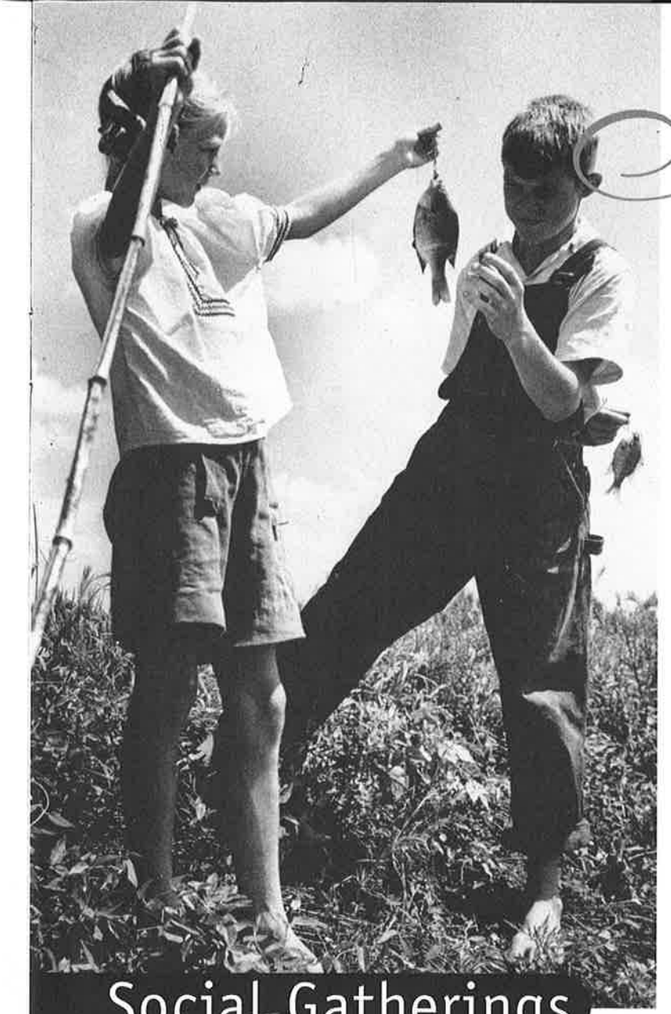
Popeye accused Sloppy Joe of not being really married to Katy, the woman with whom he lived.

"You ain't really married to Katy—you ain't got nothing but a commissary license." Joe let him have it full in the face with a forty-five, removing rapidly the eye of the negro attacked.

Big Emma continued to cook her catfish while the elimination ceremony was in progress and the men, circled around a pair of dice and a lantern, went ahead with their gambling. The corral boss, who makes it his business to doctor sores on the necks of mules in the levee camp and is often referred to as "the nursemaid to a passel of mules," threw the hot-barrel gun in the river.

While Big Emma finished her catfish cooking, Bootlegger Sam had gone after another batch of corn whiskey. His return signaled the temporary finish of the dice game as the levee workers stocked up with more hooch on which to make a night of it and leave a little over for an eye-opener the next morning.

Since the levee negro doesn't take to song while he is eating, drinking and making merry, the gambling is continued after Big Emma has sold all of her catfish plates and Bootleg Sam his entire stock of liquor. The fish fry goes on all night and far into the next day, while the Father of Waters turns over in his bed and rolls on to the Gulf. The levee negroes are happy, Big Emma is crowned anew queen of "catfish row" and Old Sam, the bootlegger man, is hailed again as "What a man!" MF



Social Gatherings

Itawamba County

Fletcher Stokes • October 8, 1938

Ever integral to courting, food can function as both a token of affection and seduction in the playful barter documented herein. Today, though not as widespread, pie auctions are still held in the rural South.

— John T. Edge

ACTIVITIES BEGAN AT THE SCHOOL HOUSE when the auctioneer, (a farmer from a neighboring community), mounted a table and announced he was goin' to sell these here boxes to the highest responsible bidder. He also added that it was his understanding that the feller who bought a box, got the girl "to boot."

Two tables full of boxes attractively arranged were on the stage, all bedecked with crepe paper of every hue. Some had improvised handles to simulate lunch baskets, others tied with bows of ribbon, with either contrasting or clashing colors.

Just how these beau brummels knew which box to bid on must remain a deep dark mystery, but if a certain youngster, who was known to be head over heels in love, ventured a bid on a box, a sly wink from a substantial patron to a rival, would start bidding in lively earnest; "four bits," "sixty cents," "five," "seventy-five." It slows down a moment for the rival to get a reassuring nod that it is all right to go ahead. Meanwhile the auctioneer is filling in; "seventy-five cents an' ag'in yo'. Air y' goin' to let this purty box go fer that measly little bit: Remember! You git the gal, too. This here's a heavy box and I warrant they's sump'n good t' eat in it." The rival runs the bidding to two dollars, whereupon the more favored suitor makes a bold dashing and surging bid of two dollars and thirty cents, and they let him have it.

Heard in the room; "I ain't et nuthin' fer a week. I got to git some gal's box here tonight." "I had peas, cornbread, side meat and soggum molasses fer supper, 'fore I come up here. I ain't carin' a flip fer these newfangled dewdads the gals put nowadays." "Y' know that dadgum home eckernomist teacher puts more fool ideas into these gals' heads, in jist a little while, than their mammies c'n git out a'tall."

One lady with some small children said: "I brung along a box of grub, so's we'uns c'd eat when the rest did. I allus did hate to be odd like."

When the boxes were all sold, they "fell to" with gusto. The less bold, of the boys and young men, who had failed to get a box, huddled together in an attempt to give consolation to each other and say funny things about their more fortunate friends.

After the eating, the teacher thanked them all kindly for the substantial contribution to the library fund, and the heads of the households gathered together the children and belongin's to got home. The younger set wanted to stay awhile and play games; but when the hubbub and stir had subsided, so many of them had to go in the same conveyance with their elders, there weren't enough left to play. MF

Photo Courtesy Ferris Collection,
University of Mississippi Department of Special Collections

Dinner on the Grounds

All Day Singing

circa 1935-1942

Central to life in the "Bible Belt" South, religion and song were detailed in the America Eats project. This essay provides a rich description of a celebration of the two with the olio of food that sustained it — including a wide assortment of chicken dishes and pickled foods. The author for this piece is unidentified.

— Sarah E. Torian

THERE IS AN OLD AXIOM that fighting and feuding are easily plowed under with food and song. Certainly a man can't stand up by his neighbor and sing "Amazing Grace! How Sweet the Sound," and then turn around and fuss with him about a hog, a dog or a fence line. Not a Mississippi man, anyway. For, although a Mississippian gets tempered up in a hurry, he is also believed to be born with a prayer in his heart, a song on his lips, and an unwavering appetite for picnic food. All day singing with dinner on the ground has come to deserve him as "hatchet-burying" time as well as a singing and eating session.

In one section of the state there is a tri-county singing association that meets twice a year, and when that group of voices bears down the mules hitched below the hill start to bray. From the first notes that are sung until the last leader calls for "God be With You Till We Meet Again," singing continues throughout the day.

In the church women sit on one side of the house, the men on the other. Those who read shaped notes take their seats in the front rows. The first leader calls out a number from his Sacred Harp song books and sets the pitch. He asks for the tune and the church house rings with the "fa, sol, la" of the Elizabethan scale. The words come next and each leader tries to extract from the willing "class" its best. As the morning wears on the women present who say they can't "sing a stitch" prepare the table for dinner. Near noontime, the smell of food begins to compete with the swell of rhythms. And when a tune as familiar as "On Jordan's Stormy Banks" falls off, even the leader knows it's time for the Sacred Harp to be laid aside. He solemnly closes the book and announces that dinner will be served outside.

On the improvised tables the women have prepared a spread of food for their hungry and weary vocalists. Chicken seems to be the songbirds' meat for it is evident in great quantity and variety. There is chicken pie, crisp fried chicken, country fried chicken with gravy, broiled chicken, chicken giblets and hard-boiled eggs. There are baked hams and country sausage, and no all-day singing dinner is just right without potato salad. Homemade cucumber pickle, peach pickle, and pickle relish eat mighty well with all this, and there's plenty of cold biscuits and homemade lightbread.

The best cooks of the community bring their cakes and pies and a man is hard put to choose between apple pie and devil's food cake with coconut icing. It may be that he will pass them both up for some of the jelly cake, especially if it is a ten-stacker.

Singing is resumed after dinner, but it takes a potent leader to get much spirit into the music right after such a meal. But song finally takes hold again and the singing of "Sweet Morning" takes on added meaning.

The final number is heard at sundown, and the courting couples wander up from the spring to join their folks for the trek home. It is a quiet leave-taking, without many good-byes. Those had been said when the leader asked for the words: "God be with you till we meet again." MF

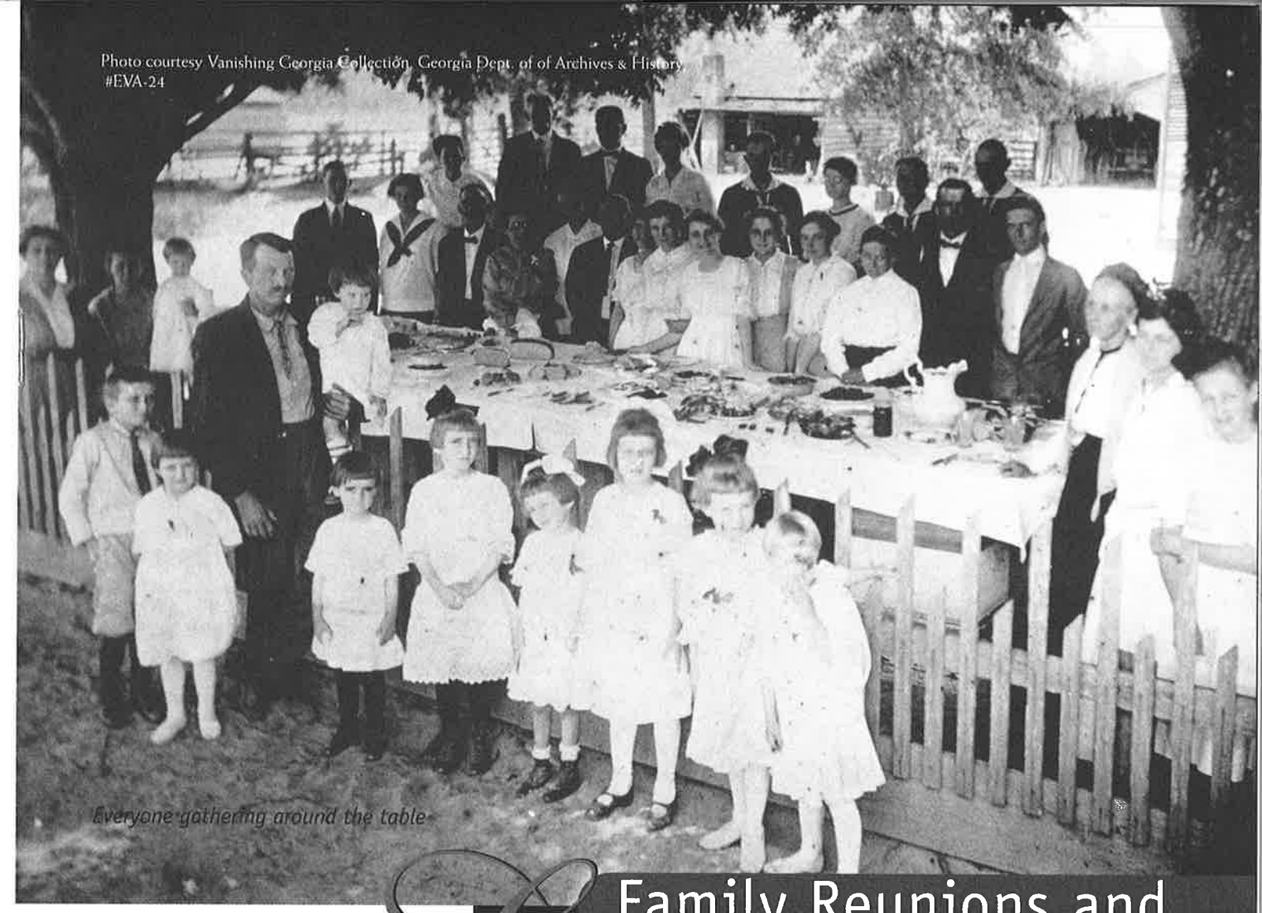


Photo courtesy Vanishing Georgia Collection, Georgia Dept. of of Archives & History
#EVA-24

Everyone gathering around the table

Family Reunions and Sunday Dinner

circa 1935-1942

Festivities of food and family would seem to be universal. However, this description of family reunions and dinners is undeniably Southern, revealing the power of Confederate memories among Depression-era white southerners. The author of this piece is unidentified.

— Sarah E. Torian

MISSISSIPPI may forsake many original customs, beliefs, and politics, but it is safe to wager that family reunions and Sunday dinner will always be regarded as a major event.

"Excusing the war between the States," as a native Mississippian may explain, these southerners have little or no regard for "high history," but there are few of them that can't vividly recall the first family reunion attended and the accompanying festivities, including, of course, the feed.

There is something about a family reunion and Sunday dinner that even the forgetfulness of a child can't erase from the memory of a native Mississippian. Five, or at least four, generations of the family are likely to be represented and the reunion is usually held on an important event date in the life of one of the guests who may number from ten to more than fifty. Both old and young come from every section of the state to pay their respects and participate in the feast.

The food served is one of the important highlights of the family reunion for the "little pot is put in the big one," to use a good old Mississippi expression that indicates a Roman holiday in as far as the culinary art is concerned.

Since hog killing time (any time after the first frost) seems to serve as the green light for family reunion Sunday dinners, the meal as a whole is planned about a platter of spareribs, barbecue style, backbones done with dumplings, and the inevitable crackling bread. It is doubtful if there is a time or place on earth where food is served so abundantly in so many forms and seasoned to please the taste of all concerned from great-grandpaw to the smallest youngster who gets his "serving" in the kitchen.

No meal of this sort would be complete without fried chicken

An intergenerational barbecue

cooked the Mississippi way, as popular now as it was with officers of the Confederate Army. According to a former Negro slave, who prepared food for the officers, it is best to cut a chicken into large pieces, then salt, pepper, and sprinkle with lemon juice. Dredged with flour that contains a few grains of sugar, the chicken is then fried in butter in a covered skillet. As each piece browns it is dropped into another skillet that has a little hot sweet milk in it, covered, and left to steam before serving.

And even if no one eats any part of it except the pure white, juicy breast and dressing, Mississippians feel that the meal is incomplete without baked ham on the table. Rice is another requirement and the same is true of lye hominy, tender turnip greens cooked with a country ham hock, fried corn, cabbage, rutabagas, and country potato salad. Ingredients for the latter dish include, among other things, vinegar, pickles, onions, and bacon grease.

Naturally, as is the Mississippi custom, there will be the usual quota of hot biscuits, homemade pickles, relish, and sour beets mixed with cucumbers. No family reunion dinner is entirely satisfactory without spice cake and devil's food cake with coconut icing poured over it.

Equally interesting as the bountiful food are the relatives in attendance at Mississippi family reunion at Sunday dinner. Conversation is decidedly quaint despite the modern atmosphere of the household, and the old idea of saying the blessing before "breaking bread" is still subscribed to.

If Uncle Herbert, aged 95, immaculate in uniform and gold braid which he wore while fighting "side by side" with Street, Jackson, and Lee, desires to re-fight the "cause," he is free to do so throughout the meal. The family has heard his stories time and again but the youngsters especially never tire of hearing great-grandpaw tell anew how "we moved on down Shiloh's gruesome and death-stewed battle field."

Meanwhile, at the crowded table, although listening in respectful awe, the other relatives concentrate on the dinner. Ma, who has been up and down since the blessing, urges extra helpings all around which finally must be declined with a "No, thank you, I'm full and don't care for anything more."

The origin of family reunions coupled with Sunday dinner is rather vague, but Mississippians like to believe it originated in the state. Whatever the source, the gathering still serves to hold the family together and assures them one of Ma's dinners at least once a year. MF

Photo courtesy of Vanishing Georgia Collection, Georgia Dept of Archives & History, JAS-030-002

Field Peas and Sowbelly

author unknown

"Wake up Jacob
Day's a-breakin'
Peas in the pot
and hoecake bakin'!"

A familiar daylight call in the hill counties, and one well calculated to help even a sleepy boy get up "on the right side of the bed." For the smell of hoecake baking and field peas steaming yields a zestful incense to the fresh dewy morning.

Field peas may mean any kind of peas that grow so well in the fields of Mississippi. There are black-eyed peas, lady peas, bilbo peas, black crowders, white crowders, speckled peas, whipporwill peas, chickpeas, and cowpeas. "Sowbelly means the fat salt pork also called middlings. Together they form a standard article of diet and, properly prepared, they furnish a food that native Mississippians have long enjoyed. Put a hunk of sowbelly in a pot of cold water. Bring to a boil and cook one hour. Add peas, which should have been soaked overnight and carefully washed. Boil together until the peas are soft. Season with salt and pepper and serve with corn pone and buttermilk. On New Year's Day the sowbelly should be replaced by a piece of hog jowl. This combination will insure a bountiful supply of food for every day of the new year. MF

Photo by Marion Post Wolcott, Courtesy Library of Congress, LC USF 33-31081-M1

School children share a simple lunch

Possum & Pomegranate

Kate C. Hubbard • Circa 1935-1942

Possum & Pomegranate

KATE C. HUBBARD penned this piece as an introduction to a long list of Mississippi recipes, many of which follow in the next section. Through letters exchanged between Hubbard and America Eats editor Gene Holcomb, we can confirm that Hubbard's assignment was to tell a story which showcased as many of the state's traditional food customs as possible: preparing fruit preserves, having church dinners "on the grounds," enjoying special holiday foods. In this rather dated piece, a fictional "Mammy" becomes the mouthpiece for myths of moonlight, magnolia, loyal slaves, and bountiful meals in the ante-bellum South. While perhaps offensive to current consciousness of race and class, Hubbard's article provides a compelling view of the place of food in the traditional Mississippi culture of an earlier time.

— Sarah E. Torian

THERE ARE FEW MISSISSIPPIANS to whom the smell of crushed weeds and the dew on the blackberry vine does not bring an intangible feeling of the long ago. We remember the tin bucket left in the nearest shade, the luscious sweetness of the berries that failed to get into the quart cup that we held in one hand while we plucked nimbly, trying to avoid the clinging briars. We stepped around cautiously with much care watching for the snakes that never appeared. The sun grew warm on our backs as it climbed and there were many warnings from our guardian angel, Mammy. "You stay close to Mammy, Baby. Your mamma sho' would be mad at me if you got yo' little face scratched up wid dese old briars. An', don't you get so close to dat branch neither. I sho' don't want to get all muddy pullin' you out of dat water."

"Mammy," said a little thin girl in

a gingham dress, "There are so many kinds of food in the woods, it seems to me that God ought to punish people that don't put up enough stuff in the summer to feed them in the winter."

"He do, Honey," said Mammy, her flying brown finger never pausing in their search for blackberries. "He sho' do! He jes lets 'em go hongry."

"That's right." said the little girl with a note of laughter. "Well, we won't go hungry for blackberries this year, nor for anything else if mother keeps going."

"You ought to be glad yo' mamma do put up a heap of things for winter." Times ain't what they used to be. It don't seem like folks has as much to eat as they used to have in the old days. My gran'maw was head cook on a plantation when she was young and she told me how they used to do. Her marster never come back from the trip widout bringin' her a present and tellin' her that nobody in the whole country kin cook spoonbread and ashcake like she could. She used to tell me how white folks et in dem days and it was a sight.

"Granny said they had a big clay oven in the back yard and she roasted whole pigs in it. Not great big ole pigs, but little tender young ones! She rubbed pomegranate juice all over the meat and made dressing out of bread crumbs and hick'ry nuts and chink-a-pins, wid salt and pepper and flour and little dabs of butter all around. She would stuff dat pig and roast him in that clay oven, and when she take dat little rascal out you could smell him a mile. Den she would lay him out on that great big blue dish, put an apple in his mouth and hog-foot jelly all colored red around him. De white folks always made a big 'miration over dat dish when Granny brung it in.

"Dat wouldn't no more'n be de beginnin' of de meal neither. Dey would have fried chicken and chicken pie on de table wid dat pig, and maybe barbecued piece of beef too. And 'course dey had vege'bles too, and all de relishes and de sauces and de pickles and de jellies you could think of in de world. It was all good and in dem days you never did hear tell of nobody gettin' sick 'cause dey et something. Dey sho' relished dey vittles too. In dem old days when de right time come dey had pies and cakes and cobblers and custards and syllabub till dey jes' couldn't eat no more, but wid all dat my granny said dat many's de day when her old Marster would leave all dat good stuff on de table and make a meal off of ashcake and cold buttermilk."

"M-mm-, I don't blame him," said the little girl. "I wish I had some right this minute. Tell me how to make ashcake, Mammy."

"You take about a quart of meal and puts salt and sody and a little bit of molasses and den you wets it down wid buttermilk till you can make little pones of it. You wipes off de hot bricks on de hearth with a wet cloth and dat's all. You ought to could do dat by yo' self."

"I bet I could. I know how to bake sweet potatoes right now. You have to grease them with bacon fat before you put them in the oven."

"Dats right! Dey ain't much better eatin' in dis world dan baked yams and butter, but endurin' de war my mammy had to eat so many yams dat she lost her taste for dem and never did relish dem no more. Lawdy, Honey, folks sho' did have a hard time in dem days. My granny say dey couldn't get no coffee for love nor money, and course de white folks got to have dey coffee. Dey made it out of roasted huckleberries, and dey made it out of okra, and dey made it out of potato peelin's and sometimes dey roasted meal bran and made coffee out of dat. I reckon dey wuz better dan nothin', but I jes soon have sassafras tea for me.

When dey couldn't get flour dey lernt how to make potato bread, and it was so good dey kept right on makin' it till now. When dey couldn't get no salt dey dug up de dirt under de smoke house and get some out of that, and when dey couldn't get no sugar dey jes' used homemade m'lasses. My mammy said that her Ole Miss make many a meal off of dandelion greens and corn pone and you wouldn't never know dey wuz'nt her regular rations.

I reckon it was de war dat made us folks in Mississippi git down to less eatin'. We ain't got so much now, but we ain't lost our touch on de seasonin's and when yo' Mamma put down a big bowl of pot-likker, wid egg-bread and butter and cold milk, you sho' don't see nobody pickin' at dey vittles."

"Wonder what we are going to have for dinner." mused the child.

"I knows what we gonna have 'cause I done provided for it. We gonna have mustard greens cooked wid hambone. I washed dem greens myself. And we gonna have dem little green onions and radishes and tomatoes and mustard pickles, and corn meal muffins. Besides dat, I scraped a whole pile of dem new potatoes dat I grabbled yestiddy, and I done already sent a quart of dese berries to de house so your mamma kin make blackberry dumplin's. She gonna make de kind you boils in a bag and den puts sweet mint sauce on."

"Mamma said ham and honey with grits and hot biscuits for supper" said a boy's voice from beyond the briars near by. "That's what I like!"

"You sho' do!" chuckled Mammy. "When I puts dat big square pan full of sody biscuits in the stove I counts two for your mamma, four for your papa, three for dis baby chile, and de rest for you. I knows better dan to make little bitty company biscuits too!"

"I don't care," said the voice. "Dad said hot biscuits and flapjacks were good food for us men."

"Dats right too! Dey makes yo' mustaches grow and so does dem flour muffins dat yo' mamma makes and dem waffles you et dis mornin' for breakfast, and so does dat slat risin' light bread yo' Aunt Alice makes. Hits' a wonder you ain't got great long whiskers from de amount you done already et. You don't care though and I don't neither.

"Now you chillun act like you slowin' down! Pick fast and I'll tell you something. Yo' mamma told me that we got jam dese berries today cause tomorrow we gonna boil a ham an' make cake an' pick chickens an' boil potatoes for salad. De next day is Sunday an' dey is gonna be dinner on de ground at church."

"Ah, I knew that," said the little girl pausing to scratch her bare leg vigorously, "Aunt Alice and her family are coming and she will have sliced potato pie. Dad loves that."

"Dat's right baby! He sho' do. Yo' grandma comin' too, an she always bring chicken n' dumplins' and a deep peach pie. Mis' Sims, she gonna bring fried ham and chicken wid cream gravy, and yo' Uncle Dan's family is sho' to bring smoked sausage and peach pickles and watermelon rind preserves. All dem things jes' suits dinner on de ground. Dey is always special vittles for special times."

"Mammy, why do we always have hog jowl and black-eyed peas on the table on New Year's Day?" asked the little white child.

"'Cause dat will make you have plenty to eat all de year. We has to do dat for luck. When thanksgivin' come, it ain't right less'n you has turkey an' cranberries an pum'kin pie. Christmas we has another turkey and baked ham an' ambrosia for New Year we has goose but we always has hog jowl and black-eyed peas too."

"And fruitcake! Don't forget that" cried the voice in the thicket.

"Det's right! Yo' mamma makes dem fruitcakes befo' Thanksgivin' and stows dem away under lock an' key wid de brandied peaches, and we has dat Christmas and New Year both. I don't think so much of dat fruitcake myself. I wants mine to be one of dem Lady Baltimore kind. I likes cake, but mos' gen'ally I likes plain eatin! De best eatin' comes when we kills hawgs and has spareribs and backbone, souse and liver cheese, and chit'lin's. And cracklin' bread! I loves dat stuff. Dey ain't hardly nothin' better than fresh pork scraps and homemade hominy neither! I ain't hard to please though. I likes possum and taters alright. Now yo' grandmaw likes quail breast better an anything, and your Uncle John chooses squirrel and dumplin's. Your Gran'paw always say he jes' can't git enough fried fish , an when your Uncle Ed goes down to Gulfpo't he jes' about live on crabs and shrimp gumbo. When he was little his Paw had to take him outside de hotel and spank him to get him to quit hollerin' for shrimp gumbo for breakfast. Dat sho' must be good stuff. Miss Annie says dey knows de best ways in de world to cook crabs and oysters down there.

"I gonner be glad too, when de huckleberries gits ripe so we can have huckleberry pie. Your Uncle John said one time dat soon as he git grown he was gonner go travellin' and eat on de diner, and whenever de waiter come up to him he was gonna rear back and say, "Bring me some huckleberry pie." Your Grandpaw nearly hurt hisself laughin' about dat, but I ain't yet seed nothin' so funny in it.

Y'all been workin' real good now, and we gonna stop and eat dem big old red tomatoes I got in dat bucket settin' in de edge of de creek. You go git de bucket, Sonny boy, and be sho' you don't out de salt."

Oh, that delicious goodness of thirst-quenching juice flavored only with the salt that we held in damp little hands! It all comes back with Mammy's soft voice! "When de muscadines comes in we got to make a heap of jelly dis year. Yo' mama's kinfolks from Californy is comin' for Christmas, and I ain't never forgot how dey tuck on over dem glasses of muscadine jelly and redhaw jelly. Dey like de fig preserves and de quince jelly too.

"Lawdy mussy! What wid the de hick'ry nuts, de walnuts and de chinka-pins in de trees; de goobers, de roas'n'ears, de popcorn, de peas and beans an' pum'kins in de fields; de garden full of butterbeans and tomatoes, de orchard full of fruit, de yard full of chickens, de cows comin' in, and de calves gettin' fatter every day et do look like everybody in dis country sho' ought to have a plenty of somep'n t'eat.

Anyhow, we ain't gonna be hongry today 'cause we gonna fill up dis here last little bucket what de 'matoes come in, right quick, and den we gonna git on back to de house befo' dis sun burns us down and de chiggars eats us up.

MISSISSIPPI ARTS COMMISSION

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The Recipes

Pot-likker

In the beginning let it be understood that there must be a black pot — no other kind will exactly do. The pot must be more than half filled with boiling water. Into this water goes a sizable slice of smoke-cured pork, a piece with streaks of lean untainted bacon. Let this boil while the turnip greens or mustard are being washed and washed until they are free of even one lingering grain of sand. Let the clean leaves freshen in cold water for an hour or so, then put them gently into the pot with the meat. When the water begins to bubble again, season with salt, black pepper, and a very small pod of red pepper. Move the pot to the back of the stove or turn down the heat; cover, and let simmer until the greens are tender and the meat is perfectly done. If it takes two hours, then it is still worth all the time it takes, for a cupful of steaming pot-likker and a slice of golden egg-bread dripping with melted butter will put a rosy glow on a hungry world. If a lingering desire for food remains, take a big helping of greens, chop into it a couple of shallots and sprinkle with pungent pepper sauce. Then butter a new slice of egg bread and go right ahead.

Sweet Pickles

It is better to have little finger sized cucumbers, but as far as the taste goes, bigger ones cut into slices or chunks about one inch thick, are just as good. There should be about two gallons of cucumbers. Place in a stone jar and pour over them two cups of salt and one gallon of boiling water. Let this stand for one week, skimming every day.

On the eighth day drain well and pour over the fruit one gallon of fresh boiling water. Let this stand for twenty-four hours.

On the ninth day drain again and pour over another gallon of boiling water and one tablespoon of powdered alum. Let this stand twenty-four hours.

On the tenth day drain liquid off and pour over one gallon of fresh boiling water. Let stand twenty-four hours.

On the eleventh day drain water off and put the fruit in a clean stone jar or a preserving kettle. Prepare a syrup of five pints of vinegar, 1/2 ounce of celery seed, six cups of sugar, and one ounce of stick cinnamon. When this is boiling hot pour it over the cucumbers. Let stand twenty-four hours.

On the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth day drain and re-heat the syrup, adding one cup of sugar each day. On the last day pack the cucumbers in fruit jars, cover with the syrup. Put rubbers and tops on the jars and do not screw down tight. Heat these jars of sweet pickles to the scalding point and seal. You may think you would never be willing to undertake such a prolonged process, but if you ever get one sniff of these pickles, you will do anything necessary to get your pantry stocked with them. They smell like Araby the Best, and they taste better than they smell.

Chittlins

It has been said that hog meat, in one form or another, is the Mississippian's staple diet. And considering how we eat it fresh in winter, cured in spring, and salted in summer, and how we use the belly fat with vegetables the year round, we have to admit that pork is certainly our dish. It is all good eating, from the hog jowls to the squeal, but come a cold January day and hog-killing time, what we hanker for is the chittlins.

We favor the small intestines for our chittlin feast but the small ones come in right handy for casing the sausage meat, so the large intestines will do. It takes a keen knife to split the intestines from end to end, then they must be scraped and washed until they are good and white. They have to soak over night in salted water but since we, ourselves, are too tired from hog sticking to do the dish justice, we can it.

By sun-up Ma has drained the chittlins and put them to boil in fresh salted water. She does this outdoors since boiling chittlins have a right high stench and she won't have them smelling u p her kitchen. After they boil tender, ma takes them out and cuts them into pieces two or three inches long. She says you can meal them or flour them according to your fancy, but she always meals hers and fries them crisp in deep fat. Those that like 'em extra hot put red pepper and sage in the boiling water, and everybody sees that there's plenty of catsup and salt and pepper on the table.

There is a State organization which calls itself the Mississippi Chittlin Association. Mr. Dan B. Taylor is president and Mr. Pat V. James, of Hot Coffee, is secretary. Mr. Si Corley, State Commissioner of Agriculture and an enthusiastic member, says that the sole object of the meeting is chittlin eating and that the members waste no time getting down the business at hand.

Hoecake

Grandma Smith, sprightly, deeply wrinkled and bronzed by outdoor life, and with a bit of Choctaw ancestry, gives this recipe for hoecake.

"Take you about a quart of meal, a teaspoon salt (it mightn't be salt enough for you an' again it might), make it up (not too soft) with water (some folks use hot water to make it stick together but I don't have no such trouble iffen I bake it good an' brown — an' to my mind hot water gives it a gummy taste), put in hot pot or pan that's well greased (Indians used to use hot stones), pat it down with you spoon flat, let it lie over that fire till you know there is a good crust on the under side, turn it over an' brown the other side, then eat."

Grandma Smith
Route 1, Gulfport, Miss.

Ash Cake

Make a hoecake out'n meal, salt, a little grease, and some boilin' water. Shape wid yo' hands. Pull out some live coals out of de fire place. Wrap cakes in a collard leaf, place on de coals coverin' wid some more not so hot. Let dem bake about 15 minutes. Dey's sho fitten'.

Pear Wine

Though probably not altogether legal under Mississippi's rigid prohibition laws, pear wine is a common home-made beverage of real quality. Sand or "pineapple" pears are so plentiful that they frequently rot on the ground or are sold as low as ten cents per bushel on the trees so that the home-owner usually figures the cost of his champagne-like beverage at only twelve to fifteen cents per gallon, the price of the sugar needed for it.

Juice may be obtained raw by grinding and pressing the fruit. The commoner and better way is to dice fruit, including some of the peel, and stew slowly in limited water till tender; squeeze out juice through bags; strain very carefully; add 2 1/2 to 3 pounds sugar per gallon; put into narrow-mouth glass, stone or wooden containers; leave open for several days till fermentation is well started; cork (leaving a vent for gasses — preferably rubber tube with end immersed in water); store in cool dark place; cork tightly when vinous fermentation ceases (2 to 3 weeks). Improves with further aging.

Good ripe fruit, cleanliness, freedom from dregs or floating particles, proper moderate temperature, and exclusion of air, so that alcohol does not escape or acetic (vinegar) fermentation set in, are important factors toward best results. It is often advisable to drain from dregs and re-bottle for aging.

Clarence Kerns,
October 16, 1941
Gulfport, Mississippi

Souse

The worst part of making souse is getting the pigfeet and the head ready to cook. The hard tips of the feet are removed and the tough snout cut off. The feet and head are carefully scraped and cleaned, until there is not one single bristle left to appear later in the souse. This done, the head and feet are boiled in a large pot until the meat is so tender that it falls away from the bone. Then take out every bit of bone and gristle, leaving a mass of perfectly tender meat. To this mass add salt and pepper and sage to suit the family taste and work in thoroughly. Pack the meat down in bowls and lay a weight on each bowl. When it is cold the souse will be jelled solidly, and should be sliced and served cold. A delicious dish: But, do not deceive yourself to the point of believing that you may safely eat all you want.

Cracklin' Bread

Make a bowl of egg bread and then add a cup full of brown crumbly cracklin's to each quart of batter. Put three tablespoons of drippings in an iron skillet and get it piping hot. Pour what grease is left running around after the skillet is greased, into the batter. Stir carefully and then pour the batter in the hot skillet and bake immediately in hot oven.

Green Corn

The best way to cook roasting ears is to boil them tender in a big pot of

salted water, and then serve with slathers of golden butter and a sprinkle of black pepper. Some people however, seem to have a delicacy about getting buttered from ear to ear, which is almost necessary if one is to eat corn on the cob. To please these strange people the southern cook prepares the juicy and delectable dish that we call fried corn.

Fried Corn

The ears must be carefully freed of clinging corn silks first of all. Then the cook stands the ear on end and slices the very outer tip of the grain off with a thin keen knife. Then she scrapes boldly down the ear with the back of the blade so as to bring out the rich, delicious, milky center of the corn, leaving the tougher outside of the grain still attached to the cob. It will take a goodly number of ears for the family so don't stop too soon. Fry two or three slices of sweet bacon in the skillet until the grease is extracted. Remove the slices and pour in the corn. Season with salt and black pepper. Add a cupful of water, cover tightly and weight the lid — a flat iron will serve for that. Simmer gently until most of the water is gone and the corn is thoroughly done. Stir occasionally to prevent scorching.

Fruitcake

1 pound of flour
1 dozen eggs
1 pound of sugar
1 pound of butter
1 cup of port wine
2 tsp. of baking powder
1 T. ginger
2 T. of vanilla extract
1 T. cloves
1 T. cinnamon
2 pounds of raisins
2 pounds of almonds
1 pound of citron ,
or watermelon rind preserves
1 pound of currants
1 pound of coconut

It is usually just as well to spend the day before you bake the cake, getting everything ready. The raisins must be chopped and the currants carefully washed. Roll both thoroughly in flour, which is not to come out of the pound required for the cake. Blanche the almonds and chop the citron, or watermelon rind slice very thinly and cut in small pieces. Grate the coconut carefully. All spices are pulverized. Cream the butter and sugar together carefully. Add well-beaten yolks of the eggs. Sift flour and baking powder together and add slowly. Add wine alternately with the flour. Beat in spices and flavoring. fold in well-beaten egg whites, then add prepared fruits. Bake three hours in a moderate to low oven. Delicious but dangerous. Stuff that dreams are made of.

Sassafras Tea

There are two kinds of sassafras roots — the white and red. If you want to get the pale amber aromatic tea that snaps us out of spring fever, then red sassafras roots are the ones you need.

Scrub the roots vigorously with a brush and cut them into short lengths. Put them on in cold water and bring to a boil. Boil until the color of the water is pale amber, and serve hot with sugar to taste.

Brandied Peaches

4 pounds of peeled peaches
cloves
4 pounds of sugar
3 1/2 cups of water
1 egg white
1 pint of white brandy

Stick two cloves in each whole peach. Make a syrup of the sugar and water and add the egg white beaten to a stiff froth. Skim carefully. Add the fruit one layer at a time and boil five minutes. Pack the peaches in sterilized jars. Boil the syrup about ten minutes longer, or until it thickens. Remove from heat. Add the brandy and pour over the peaches. Seal at once. Aging for several months will improve the flavor, but it takes a hard heart, a watchful eye and a strong will to accomplish the aging.

Persimmon Beer

Remove the seeds from enough ripe persimmons to make a bushel of fruit without the seeds. Line a wooden keg with clean corn shucks. Mash up the persimmons with half a bushel of corn meal and half a bushel of sweet potato peelings. Put in the keg and cover with water. Cover and allow to stand till the taste is right and then bore a hole in the top of the keg and draw off the beer. If you put a piece of cornbread in a cup and fill up the cup with persimmon beer, you'll have something highly satisfactory. Indulge cautiously until you learn your capacity.

Blackberry Dumplings

This dish is not made with piecrust but with ordinary biscuit dough made just a trifle shorter than usual. Roll the dough out a little thinner than for biscuit, on a well-floured cloth. Cover the top of the dough with a thick layer of fresh ripe blackberries. Roll the dough and berries up and tie the whole in the cloth on which it was rolled. Put the whole thing in a pot of briskly boiling water. Bring it back to boiling point as quickly as possible and then cook steadily till done. While the dumplings boil make a sweet sauce as follows; Take one and a half cups of top milk, one cupful of sugar, 1/4 cup of butter, cook together thoroughly and flavor by putting in sprigs and leaves of mint which have been bruised. Remove the mint leaves before serving the sauce, which should be served hot on slices of the boiled dumplings.

Watermelon Rind Preserves

Select watermelon with a thick rind; cut the rind in any shape desired; lay the pieces in strong salt water for two or three days; then soak them in alum water for an hour to harden them; to every pound of fruit use a pound of sugar. Make a syrup of a little water, sugar, and a few small pieces of white ginger root and one lemon, sliced. Take out the lemon and root, after the syrup has been boiled, and add the watermelon rind; let it boil until transparent. Carefully lift it and put it in the jars, pouring the syrup over it.

Chicken Pie

Cut chicken into serving pieces, salt and pepper to taste and parboil until tender. Line sides of a deep baking dish with pastry cut in strips. Put in a layer of chicken, then a layer of dough. Fill nearly to the top of the dish. Put a solid piece of the dough rolled very thin over the top for the crust. Press down edges and make a hole in the center. Pour stock in which chicken was boiled through the hole. Bake in hot over until brown. When crust is delicately brown, dot all over with butter and pour in a cup of rich milk or thin cream. Let it boil up once and then serve. If one chicken is not enough to make a big pie, chop off another's head, but don't fill your chicken pie with extraneous materials such as carrots, potatoes, green peas, or anything else, until it becomes a stew. Or, at least, if you do that, do not call the result a chicken pie.

Spoon-bread

2 cups of corn meal
2 1/2 cups of boiling water
2 T. of butter
1 1/2 cups of buttermilk
1 tsp. soda
1/2 tsp. of salt
2 eggs

Scald the meal with the boiling water and let it cool. Add the butter, soda, buttermilk, salt, and eggs well beaten. This batter will be very thin. Pour into well-buttered baking dish and bake 40 minutes at 350 degrees. Eat at once, before bread falls, serving it out of its baking dish with a spoon

Take a cold rainy day in the late fall, and garnish it with a supper of spoon-bread, smoked sausage, hominy, and blackberry jam, and you have an evening in which you can readily understand why it is that the people in Spain do as they do when it rains. They just let it rain.

Shortenin' Bread

4 cups sifted flour
1 cup light brown sugar
2 cups butter

Mix flour and sugar and work in butter. This will be very stiff. Put it in a pan wide enough to permit the mass to be patted down to about 1/2 inch thickness. Bake in a moderate oven.

Sliced Potato Pie

Peel and slice four good sized sweet potatoes. Boil in slightly salted water until almost done but still firm. Lay these slices on the bottom of a baking pan. Cover with a liberal sprinkling of sugar and dot with pieces of butter. Pour in enough boiling water to come half-way as high as the potatoes. Dust with powdered cinnamon and cover the whole with a crust of rich biscuit dough. Prick with a fork all over the top. Bake in a moderate oven, and when the crust begins to brown, put bits of butter all around over the top. Serve hot.

Hush Puppies

2 cups corn meal
1 T. flour
2 tsp. baking powder
1 tsp. salt
1 egg, beaten
6 T. chopped onion
2 cups milk

Sift dry ingredients together. Mix egg with mild and onion. Stir all together and beat. Drop by tablespoonfuls into kettle of deep fat where fish are being fried. Drain on paper and eat with the fish. MF

Possum and 'Taters

Rub Possum inside and out with salt. Place breast up, in the roaster. Add one quart of water and cover closely. Bake about 45 minutes. Then surround with peeled sweet potatoes and bake uncovered until the potatoes are soft and the possum is tender and well browned.

If you live in the country, put a quart of hardwood ashes in a pot of boiling water and scald possum in that. If you live in town, you'll just have to put a tablespoon of lye in the pot of water. Scrape the possum carefully so as not to break the skin.

Fried Fish

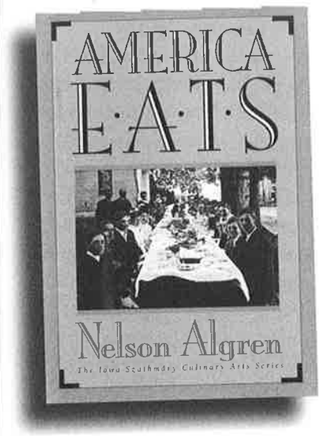
Clean the fish and wipe perfectly dry; then dip in beaten egg and afterwards in bread crumbs or corn meal, but preferably in the crumbs, patting these on well that no loose ones may fall off and burn in the fat; then plunge the fish, a few pieces at a time, in the fat which must be smoking hot and of which there must be sufficient in the pan to completely cover the fish. Cook golden brown, and drain well before serving.

Reviews

Books

America Eats
BY NELSON ALGREN
EDITED BY
DAVID E. SCHOONOVER
University of Iowa Press, 1992.
Reviewed by Nelson d. Ross

America Eats by Nelson Algren is, indeed, as the forward describes "an account of Midwestern foodways, customs and lore." At its heart, though, it is a paean to America as melting pot. It is also at times a pointed historical story



of how the colonists changed the Native Americans. From the Native Americans to the settlers, to the homesteaders, to the city dwellers of the 1930's, it is a story of how people lived and how their food and food customs evolved.

During the Depression, years before his National Book Award novel, *The Man with the Golden Arm*, Algren and other writers were hired by the Works Progress Administration. Their task was to produce a series of regional guidebooks to the United States. But after the information was compiled, the government's interest turned to national defense and then to World War II. The project was shelved.

Based in Chicago, Algren ranged the Midwest from Indiana to Nebraska, and from Minneapolis to Kansas to research the book.

The unpublished manuscript entitled, "Am Eats Algren" was bought from Algren at a silent auction of his possessions in 1975 by his friend, Chef Louis Szathmary. It was finally published in 1992 to inaugurate the University of Iowa Szathmary Culinary Arts Series.

Using an anecdotal writing style including journal entries and period song lyrics, Algren creates an enjoyable and very readable social history. The book makes extensive use of photographs and includes two chapters of recipes.

Algren's Midwestern melting pot begins with the collision of the colonizing French adventurers with the Native Americans. From the Native Americans the settlers learned about barbecuing buffalo and other wild game. Most importantly, the settlers learned about corn which the Native Americans "had expended hundreds of years developing out of seed bearing grass." Corn is king in *America Eats* and the reader follows its evolution and many variations as a staple in Midwestern food history.

Modern Midwestern cornbread is a "direct descendent of the Indian ashcake, mixed from cornmeal and water, fashioned into thick cakes and baked in the cinders and ashes of prairie campfires." "Corn was cultivated for use in johnnycake, corn mush, big hominy, ashcake, corn whiskey, corn pone, or the small loaves called corn dodgers."

According to Algren, "the Indian taught the white man to exist in the wilderness...in turn the frontiersman instructed the Indian in the fastest known methods of getting blind drunk." A popular alcoholic beverage of the early Illinois settler was "stew." From this came the term "stewed" which originally meant the preparer had sampled too much. "The Frontiersman did, however, stabilize the Indian diet by improving on and inventing new methods of storage." He also implemented methods of alternating crops.

The chapter, "Festivals in the Field" describes the social rituals which revolved around the work which cultivated food and community. "House raisings, huskings, hog killings, quiltings and wood chopping bees...filled the need for social intercourse while serving their primary purpose of cooperation in pioneer dinners," "donation parties," and "box socials."

In the chapter, "Many Nations," Algren discusses the diverse feast of foods that comes from many countries to the Midwest: "Saffern buns and meat pies" from the Cornish people from Cornwall, England, Dobas torte from Romania, Sauerkraut and wieners from Germany, Goulash from the Hungarians, Lute fish suppers from Scandinavia, The Nebraska smorgasbord, Serbian Lamb, and so on and so on.

The section of the book "Foods of Many Folk" consists of recipes Algren gathered in his travels. Prior to the publication of the book in 1992, a final section was added in which the original recipes were tested and in some case rewritten.

At the beginning of *America Eats*, Algren contemplates "A great Midwestern cauldron" containing a dish from "all of the races which have subsisted in the Middle West." According to Algren, "such a cauldron would contain more than many foods; it would be, at once, a symbol of many lands and a melting pot of many peoples."

"Many peoples, yet one people; many lands, one land." His book is a testament to that fact.

Smokestack Lightning
Adventures in the Heart of Barbecue Country

BY LOLIS ERIC ELIE
PHOTOGRAPHS
BY FRANK STEWART
Farrar, Straus and Giroux,
1996.
Reviewed by John T. Edge

Snoot sandwiches.

Intrepid barbecue adventurers Lolis Eric Elie and Frank Stewart searched out the best that East St. Louis, Illinois had to offer and came up wanting — not for more, but for an explanation as to why people ate them in the first place. For an outlander, Elie's description of barbecue snoot (as in pig snout) proves less than compelling rationale for culinary adventure:

> *The snoot announces itself on the tongue with a crisp extravagance of grease. It is not so nearly as light as the conventional pork rinds that you can buy off the potato chip rack. They are more like cracklings with their combination of crisply fried fat on one side and the hard, crunchy skin on the other. It's the skin that gives you the most trouble. It seems that no matter what angle you take the snoot from, it's hard to bite into.*

Yet, to the denizens of East St. Louis, snoots are a delicacy beyond compare in much the same way that folks in Memphis, Tennessee love their barbecue spaghetti; natives of Arkansas think nothing of eating tepid barbecue atop iceberg lettuce, smothered with sauce; and natives of Owensboro, Kentucky crave barbecue mutton served with a "black dip." To borrow (and bastardize) a phrase from Tip O'Neil, former Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, **all barbecue is local**.

From their home bases of Hawkins Grill and Cozy Corner in Memphis, Elie and Stewart travel as far west as Texas, as far north as Illinois, and to the East coast in an attempt to give credence to their theory that "barbecue is a metaphor for American culture in a broad sense..." Highly subjective and idiosyncratic in approach, this travelogue of a summer spent driving through our nation's barbecue belt is most successful when the author steers clear of sociological interpretations of the culture he proposes to examine. For example: while the objective observer might find the reticence of an aged, rural Tennessee pit-master to be characteristic of his trade, Elie finds him to be guilty of racism.

Another problem is the sense of serendipity that pervades this work. Granted, one of the charms of a road-trip is the unexpected encounter. It is another matter altogether to hit the road in search of the roots of barbecue culture without doing your homework. One glaring example of the latter is Elie's visit to Jackson, Georgia where he interviews the crew at the recently opened (and now closed) Homefolk's Corner, but bypasses one of the oldest barbecue restaurants in Georgia — Fresh Air, founded in 1929.

Despite these shortcomings, there is much about this book that is laudable. *Smokestack Lightning's* focus is indeed cultural and Elie weaves an engaging and mouthwatering portrait of the diverse and dispersed diaspora of barbecue. Rather than concentrate upon which barbecue shack serves "the best ribs in America," Elie and Stewart give voice and visage to the people encountered along the way.

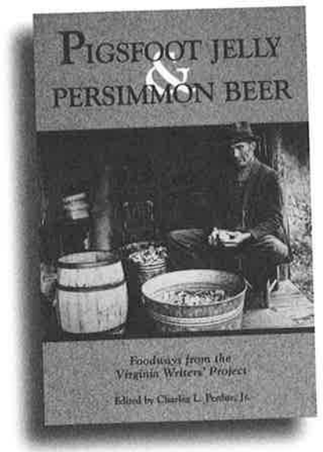
For those with an academic bent, Elie even provides a "scholarly" bibliography, ranging from a recently published dissertation by Mario Montano, entitled *The History of Mexican Folk Foodways of South Texas: Street Vendors, Offal Foods, and Barbacoa de Cabeza*, to an obscure undergraduate thesis by Ripley Golovin: *In Xanadu Did Barbecue...: A Historical Examination of the Evolution of an American Institution, the Backyard Barbecue, a Product of Our Changing Culture.*

In the final analysis, Elie's text and Stewart's stark, black and white photographs, provide the best examination of barbecue's people and traditions that has been published to date.

Pigsfoot Jelly and Persimmon Beer
Foodways from the Virginia Writers' Project

EDITED BY
CHARLES L. PERDUE, JR.
Ancient City Press, 1992.
Reviewed by John T. Edge

As anyone who has spent time rooting through the prodigious production of the Federal Writers' Project knows, a wealth of information awaits the light of day. Over the course of the past two decades, Charles and Nancy Perdue have created a virtual cottage industry out of the dissemination of such materials. With the publication of *Pigsfoot Jelly & Persimmon Beer: Foodways from the Virginia Writers' Project*, Charles Perdue has turned his attention to the prematurely aborted America Eats project. As a result, a long neglected cache of foodways lore may find its deserved audience.



The richness of the Virginia data has proven to be so seductive that Purdue presents it unedited (with nominal exception) and with little contextual grounding. Essays delineating the different "salit greens" eaten by Virginians (twenty in all — ranging from "red worms" to "stagger weed") stand well-enough on their own, yet the reader is left wanting for even a hint of whether intra-state regional preferences are responsible for the two vastly different representations of a "Protracted Meeting Dinner." Though differences in dialect hint at differences in race of the two groups described, it is possible that the same black hands prepared the food for both meals; the reader has no way of knowing.

Food events like corn shuckings, oyster roasts and community Brunswick stews are better suited to Perdue's style of presentation. As depicted by the various writers, these events evoke not only the foods prepared and served but also the community ethos from which they sprung.

Annotation to entries like "Sergeant Saunders' Brunswick Stew," is unnecessary for the original text affords the reader a glimpse of the origins of the dish, its depression-era popularity and the chauvinistic pride that Virginians take in claiming this dish as their own. Yet, tacked on the end of this entry from the 1930's is a queer bit of data from the 1980's presented out of context and out of time:

> *It must be true that Brunswick stew originated in Brunswick County, Virginia because, on February 22, 1988, Delegate R. Beasely Jones...read House Joint Proclamation 35, which proclaims that the first Brunswick stew was cooked on the bands of the Nottaway River 160 years ago. This was done in order to put rival claimants from Brunswick County, Georgia and elsewhere in their proper place.*

Though this bit of information furthers the argument for Virginia's love of Brunswick stew, Perdue's leap from the 1930's to the 1980's jeopardizes the reader's thin tether to time and place. Is this essay concerned with 1930's eating habit, 1980's food chauvinism, or the evolution of the state dish? The intent is unclear.

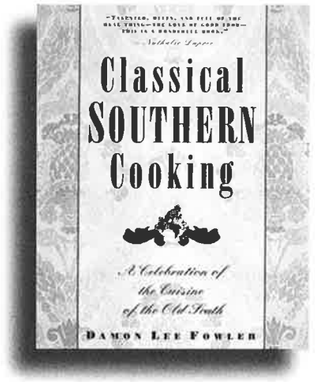
Read as a series of vignettes, the collected essays provide a great table's-eye view of Virginia foodways from 1607 to the present. But, without transitional text or explanation, the assembled vignettes remain distinct and ultimately unsatisfying.

Classic Southern Cooking

BY DAMON LEE FOWLER
New York:
Crown Publishers, 1995.
Reviewed by John T. Edge

Subtitled "A Celebration of the Cuisine of the Old South,"

Damon Fowler's work focuses upon the first half of the nineteenth century, a time that he sees as "the golden age for Southern cooking in much the same way that the fifth century B.C. represented a pinnacle of artistic achievement in Ancient Greece." At the core of this erudite and witty exploration of Southern foods and foodways are two hundred plus recipes, most with historical annota-



tions, culled from unpublished manuscripts, community cookbooks and four popular press cookbooks of the day: *The Virginia House-Wife* (1834) by Mary Randolph; *The Kentucky Housewife* (1839) by Lettice Bryan; *The Carolina Housewife* (1847) by Sarah Rutledge; and *Mrs. Hill's New Cook Book* (1867) by Annabella Hill.

Though the compendium of historical recipes and annotations would provide reason enough to pique the interest of any foodways scholar, the two chapter introduction is of equal interest. In the lively opening chapter, "Understanding Southern Cooking," the author takes issue with those who would define the South as "the land of grits, overcooked greens and hog grease." Instead, Fowler argues that Southern cookery during this "classical" period was a cuisine of remarkable diversity and advanced technique, "founded on English cooking, enriched and nourished by new native ingredients, and transformed in the hands of African cooks."

Though the work is suffused with references that detractors may label as "politically correct," the careful reader is cognizant of the obvious pride Fowler takes in celebrating the heterogeneous culture of the South. And, Fowler's sad lament for the demise of this "classical" style is no less affecting. Fowler observes that after the War between the States, "[t]he tables of both white and black Southerners would never be the same, for white household lost the skill of the black cook, and black ones lost both the influence of European traditions and the access to many ingredients."

Unfortunately, Fowler affords the reader no glimpse at the foodways of poor blacks and whites of the region, save for an inferential rant against the inferiority of post-Reconstruction cuisine, wherein he observes that "[t]hose bleak, lean years were also responsible for that notoriously ubiquitous salt pork and bacon grease;...it became usual to supplement the meager diet of field peas, greens, sweet potatoes, and grits with cheap salt pork fat."

Slight criticisms notwithstanding, this work, read as a survey of early Southern cookery books, is a wonderful primer for Southerners setting out in search of their culinary roots. Though published with a non-scholarly audience in mind, Fowler's reliance upon 19th century receipt books secures this work's historical veracity. An extensive bibliographic essay and contextual notes make *Classical Southern Cooking* a worthy addition to the libraries of academics and curious cooks alike.

North Carolina Barbecue
Flavored by Time

BY BOB GARNER
John F. Blair, Publisher, 1996.
Reviewed by Traye McCool

Bob Garner combines several elements of food and folklore in his book *North Carolina Barbecue: Flavored by Time.* Garner recounts the history of barbecue, including specific information on the North Carolina variety; a discussion of the increasingly popular barbecue contests and festivals; his personal how-to guide and recipes for North Carolina barbecue; and a restaurant tour of the places he deems significant in the world of pork.

In the historical section, Garner traces modern trends in cooking pork back more than three hundred years. His history is informed and engaging, although strictly regional in orientation. As an emissary of North Carolina barbecue, he is imminently qualified, having been approved by the North Carolina Pork Producers Association as a barbecue judge. And, he married into a family of hog farmers. Furthermore, his career as a television reporter and producer has afforded him the opportunity to do numerous television segments devoted to North Carolina barbecue.

Garner approaches the art of barbecue cooking with the reverence and zeal of a preacher at a tent meeting. Amateurs who follow the step by step instructions may indeed be converted. And, for connoisseurs who can afford a pilgrimage to the holy land of barbecue, he even includes a guide to his favorite restaurants.

Although Garner's enthusiasm for barbecue charms the reader and inspires this book, his regional bias is somewhat limiting. For instance, Garner only discusses pork. Hogs may be fine in the Carolinas but Texans will be inclined to ask "Where's the beef?" In his how-to section, Garner should also mention the benefits of an indirect fire.

True to the title, Garner only concerns himself with North Carolina barbecue, leaving the door open for other regional studies. Hopefully, other writers will build upon some of Garner's themes. Like football, barbecue is almost a religion in the South, cutting across lines of class and race like few topics can. Garner calls barbecue "the staple food of North Carolina political rallies." Perhaps an in-depth exploration of the relationship between barbecue and politics would prove fruitful. At the very least, it would make for some good eating, a research method of which Garner would heartily approve.

Newsletters

The Art of Eating

BY EDWARD BEHR
PO Box 242
Peecham, VT 05862
1-800-495-3944
quarterly publication;
$30.00 per year
Reviewed by Julie McGoldrick

From the proper squeak a fresh cheese curd makes on the teeth, to the way to fillet an anchovy, to the sterile, porous white rock under the soil in the Charentes countryside that keeps the wine grapes for Cognac fresh under the hot French sun, it is the details which make *The Art of Eating* a delightful and educational read. Written and illustrated by Edward Behr, each issue has a single topic, usually a particular food, or the food of a particular region. More than just defining a food or giving directions on its preparation (though each issue does contain a few recipes), the newsletter gives a context for the food. We come to understand the culture and the people of each region because of the food. And Behr communicates the tastes, the textures and the smells of each dish, so lovingly it seems, that the reader is as disappointed as he is when a dish doesn't meet his expectations. In one issue, Mr. Behr takes his readers with him on his quest for "Old-Fashioned Cheddar": the sharp, creamy and crumbly, honest "store cheese:" sold cut from large wheels in village stores in New England over thirty years ago. Admitting the possibility that his memory had raised the cheese to heights that it never attained in reality, Mr. Behr thoroughly combs the small cheese making factories within driving distance of his home, hoping in each new dairy that he will taste the cheese of his memory. His enthusiasm and determination is infectious, and as he describes his resentment of the bland and mediocre cheese that is mass marketed for our supermarkets, I began to long for what I didn't even realize I was lacking.

Food History News

HCR 60, Box 354 A
Isleboro, ME 04848
quarterly publication;
$15.00 per year
Reviewed by John T. Edge

Sandy Oliver, author of the award-winning *Saltwater Foodways*, publishes a food letter of which foodways scholars should be aware. Entitled *Food History News* and available quarterly, each issue is comprised of a reader's forum for exchange of ideas and information, book news and reviews, and two or three historical essays. Often, a column, "The Joys of Historic Cooking," is also featured. Of the assembled offerings, the essays are, without exception, the most compelling.

Among recent essay topics have been "Revolutionary War Camp Food," "The Truth About Catherine deMedici and French Food," and an enlightening examination of "foodlore and fakelore." The latter, titled, "Old Saws We Would Like to Dull" and written by Alice Arndt, proffers a compelling, if brief, refutation of the "old saw" that Medieval cooks used an abundance of spices in an attempt to disguise spoiled meat.

Sandy Oliver fancies *Food History News* to be a font of practical information for food history buffs. It is that and more. Though the publication has a "bare bones" feel and grammatical and spelling errors are not unknown, it is worthy of your attention and subscription.

Simple Cooking
PO Box 778
Northhampton, MA 01061
$24.00 for six issues
Reviewed by John T. Edge

Nothing could be simpler — or more profoundly enlightening and entertaining — than John and Matt Thorne's *Simple Cooking* newsletter. Though filled with culinary esoterica and practical kitchen tips, it is the single-minded, even dogged pursuit of the mysteries and manners of a particular food that defines this newsletter and differentiates it from others available.

As indulgent as it is well written, *Simple Cooking* may devote an entire issue to the joys of cornbread, as in the recent "Cornbread Nation." Or, maybe it is the quintessential dish of baked beans that piques the intellectual curiosity of the authors. No matter, the reader is assured an honest and thought-provoking treatise on the proper preparation thereof.

Never pedantic, *Simple Cooking* reads like a conversation between two bright people who like to cook and believe that to cook well, one must know not only how to make a dish but why it was made in the first place.

Also worth of consideration are two book: *Simple Cooking* by John Thorne and *Serious Pig* by John Thorne and Matt Lewis Thorne. Based upon previous issues of the newsletter, both are exemplary pieces of culinary history and rumination.

Word of Mouth
Food and the Written Word
PO Box 42568
Portland, OR 97242-1568
Reviewed by John Cox

The newsletter "Word of Mouth: Food and the Written Word" is most definitely *not* the place to go if you're looking for new recipes. Distributed out of Portland, Oregon, most of the bimonthly issues of this somewhat odd assortment of historical excerpts, personal observations, and book reviews do include a recipe or two, but these generally begin with the word, "Rinse twenty feet of lamb small intestine" or "Scald the penis and clean it" and were originally published by someone like Laurens van der Post fifty years ago in South Africa.

The forte of Johan Mathiesen, the editor, seems to be his amazing breadth of knowledge about food and writing. Mathiesen obviously knows cookbooks and other books about food, for each issue includes excerpts from an impressive variety of texts. In an issue that is dedicated partly to the food and food culture of the people of sub-Saharan Africa, for example, is an excerpt of an 1891 text which describes a menu from the Royal Kitchen of Central Africa, a lengthy discussion of sausages and Africa, and some book reviews (*Twenty-Five Years of Brewing*, James Peterson's *Fish and Shellfish*, and Susan McClure's *Preserving Summer's Bounty*), as well as a pleasant assortment of brief comments about people and places. In another issue, the editor combines the personal and the critical to produce and excellent book review of Sidney Mintz's *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom*. This issue also includes the usual olio of anecdotes, demographic facts (Of Providence, Rhode Island: "To a third of the population, they're squid; to another third, they're calamari; and to the final third, they're bait."), historical excerpts, and culinary ethnography, as well as an article on professional cookbook-dealing and a useful list of dealers.

Need a cookbook? One of these dealers will surely have it. Need a recipe? Go to the library or your local bookstore for a new cookbook. But need an interesting sampling of curiosities about food? See what Johan Mathiesen has cooking in the current, "Word of Mouth."

The Folk Poetry of Long Names

Abbott L. Ferriss

Shortly after the turn of the century, my grandfather sat down to write a check to pay Mary, the household maid. "What is your name, Mary?" The answer has been passed down in my family:

"Mary Ansie Jelsie Molly Polly Todd Yankee Doodle Yeahoo Ford."

Poetry, that's what it is, with cadence, rhythm, emphasis and other poetic qualities. Philip C. Kolin (University of Southern Mississippi) was not allowed adequate space in the *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* to address such extensive names. The longest name in his essay was that of the revered Mississippi lawyer, politician and Supreme Court justice, *Lucius Quintas Cincinnatus Lamar*, who helped the South rejoin the nation after 1865. But other names may be found in Southern folklore.

Seta Alexander Sancton of New Orleans, who was reared in Mississippi, recalls the name of her family maid: *Talitha Tabitha Lamilitary Jane Lacataline La Katealine Kitty Fisher Valentine Floyd*. One Senses a French influence, and the alliteration and rhyme would intrigue a poet: ...—tha, ...-tha, ...-cataline, ...-Kateline, Kitty Fisher and Valentine Floyd seem to round off the series with convincing sobriquets. Folk poetry, without a doubt.

My wife's doll's name must join the list of folk monikers. She and her playmates concocted it as they played, adding a few to express the "folksy congeniality" and adoration they felt for the doll (now in a shoe box, cracked, naked and hairless, but still beloved):— *Polly Dolly Adeline Amelia Agnes Lowe Ruth Elizabeth Sparks.*

The similarities among these three examples suggest an underlying structure, unconsciously reflecting a native sense of poetry.—

Mary Ansie Jelsie
Molly Polly Todd
Yankee Doodle
Yeahoo Ford
Talitha Tabitha Tamilitary
Jane Lacataline La Kateline
Kitty Fisher Valentine
Floyd
Polly Dolly Adeline
Amelia Agnes Lowes
Ruth Elizabeth Sparks

Let the poets fuss over inadequacies of meter and rhyme. These names are real poetry from the heart.

Arthur Palmer Hudson, founder of this Journal, was an intrepid collector, not only of folk songs in Mississippi and the South, but also of names. He systematized the study of names as elements of folk culture(Hudson, 1938), including the category, "Long Names." He pointed out that such long names reflect "the passion for the high sounding and honorific...—some with reason, a few with rhyme." (p. 189). He cites thirty-two examples, collected in the South, two of the lyrical ones being names given to sisters:

Eva Eudora Madge
Arabella Love
Isabella Veal

And, the second sister:

Martha Eugenia May
Louphenia Rosy Ann
Elvie Ann Veal

Hudson assumed that the lyrical names, as an art, might be reflected perfectly only by the bearers of the names, but the rhythm, meter and rhyme are easily apparent in the examples above that I have cast in poetic form.

Both Kolin and Hudson provide the framework for the systematic study of names. Hudson cited historical, and other, origin of them, and gave many examples of the following types: scriptural names; commercial; institutions and societies; geographical; circumstances of birth; classical and literary; famous and infamous people; jewels, flowers, and other ornaments; vegetables and animal kingdom; pet of "basket" names; unusual descriptions; odd combination; long names; and twins.

The study of names enlightens our understanding of our culture and the elements of it that are sufficiently valued to be given to one's offspring. They not only represent family genealogy but also history, linguistics and, as I have tried to demonstrate, poetry. MF

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Parting Hand

Photo courtesy Ferris Collection, University of Mississippi, Department of Special Collections

FROM THE BACK PORCH TO THE PULPIT...

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