



Grantmakers in the Arts

READER

Ideas and Information on Arts and Culture

Vol. 19, No. 3, Fall 2008



What is Southern?

Edna Lewis

Reprinted from the Grantmakers in the Arts Reader

Vol. 19, No. 3, Fall 2008

© 2008 Grantmakers in the Arts

Grantmakers in the Arts
604 West Galer Street
Seattle, WA 98119
(206) 624-2312
gia@giarts.org

Other articles from past GIA *Readers*, proceedings from past GIA Conferences, and additional publications of interest are available online at the GIA web site, www.giarts.org.

What Is Southern?

Edna Lewis

One day we received a remarkable phone call: Two friends had just discovered an unpublished essay by the late Edna Lewis – one of America’s most resonant and evocative food writers – that she had sent to a colleague years ago. A granddaughter of freed slaves, the late Edna Lewis left home when she was just sixteen years old and went on to become a renowned chef at Manhattan’s star-studded Café Nicholson. Her books have spread the gospel of genuine southern cuisine and inspired a generation of home cooks. In this essay she shares a lifetime’s worth of experience as she answers the question, “What is southern?”

– the editors of Gourmet, as they published this essay for the first time in January 2008

How did southern food come into being? The early cooking of southern food was primarily done by blacks, men and women. In the home, in hotels, in boardinghouses, on boats, on trains, and at the White House. Cooking is hard and demanding. It was then, and it still is now. What began as hard work became creative work. There is something about the South that stimulates creativity in people, be they black or white writers, artists, cooks, builders, or primitives that pass away without knowing they were talented. It is also interesting to note that the South developed the only cuisine in this country. Living in a rural setting is inspiring: Birds, the quiet, flowers, trees, gardens, fields, music, love, sunshine, rain, and the smells of the earth all play a part in the world of creativity. It has nothing to do with reading or writing. Many of those cooks could not read or write.

I grew up among people who worked together, traded seed, borrowed setting hens¹ if their own were late setting. Early hatched chickens were like a prize. Neighbors would compete to see who would serve the first spring chickens pan-sautéed. The first spring greens, lettuce, scallions in a vinegar dressing with salt, pepper, and sugar – no oil. They shared favors of all kinds, joined in when it came to planting or harvesting a crop, wheat threshing,

hog butchering, and cutting ice on the ponds to store for the summer in the community icehouse.

I grew up noticing the food feasts, picnics, church revival dinners with long white tablecloths. Families put out warm fried chicken, braised leg of mutton, thin slices of boiled Virginia ham. Green beans cooked in pork stock, beets in a vinaigrette sauce. English peas in cream. Baked tomatoes with crusty squares of bread on top. Fragrant

corn pudding. Potato salad with a boiled dressing. Watermelon and cantaloupe pickles and relishes, preserves and jellies, and iced tea.

Southern is an early spring morning shrouded in a thick mist. The warmth of a bright sunrise reveals shimmering jewellike dewdrops upon thicket and fence. A large spiderweb glistens, a spider trying desperately to wind its prey into the web. My father set out to prepare for planting corn. The first day, I walked behind him while he was plowing and singing one of his favorite hymns. For me, it was a great moment. Walking along, pressing my bare feet against the warm plowed earth. All of the chickens were behind me, picking up the earthworms and bugs. He turned up roots of sassafras bushes², which we took to the house for the next morning.

Southern is a spring breakfast of herring with its roe. It is the most delicious of the first-caught of spring. Shad is more advertised. They both are spring fish, then they disappear until the next spring. Herring roe is of a finer quality than the shad and wonderful sautéed in garlic, lemon juice, butter, and herbs.

Southern is a meal of early spring wild greens – poke sallet³ before it is fully uncurled, wild mustard, dandelion, lamb’s-quarter, purslane, and wild watercress. These are greens that are looked for as the first taste of spring, boiled in pork stock and served with cornmeal dumplings. The next delightful green vegetable is wild asparagus, delicious and tender, found around fence posts where birds drop the seed. They are picked at the right time, steamed and served on toast, with a rich cream sauce spooned over. Southern is a midday dinner of potted squab, tossed until done in a covered iron pot. Served with those first wild greens, a casserole of white potatoes⁴ baked in

-
1. A setting (broody) hen is one that is ready to set, or nest, on a clutch of eggs. The hormones causing broodiness are stimulated in the spring.
 2. Sassafras roots, gathered before the bushes bloom, are boiled to make an age-old beverage and spring tonic. They can be poisonous at other times of the year.
 3. Poke sallet is a dish of the cooked young greens from the pokeweed plant (*Phytolacca americana*). The word sallet is a dialect remnant of sixteenth- or seventeenth-century spelling and pronunciation.
 4. Many southerners still refer to baking or boiling potatoes as “white” or “Irish” potatoes to distinguish them from sweet potatoes, which aren’t reserved for Thanksgiving but are another everyday vegetable.

chicken stock, and a delicious strawberry shortcake of biscuit dough.

Southern is an evening of turtle soup. We would find the turtle, having been washed out of the stream in a thunderstorm, crawling toward the house, so we would pick it up, keep it for a few days, then clean and cut it up. There would be great excitement if it contained eggs, which we would add to the stew. After cooking the turtle slowly for hours, we would strain the broth, season it well, add good Sherry⁵, chop up some of the meat, and make dumplings to add to the soup with the eggs.

Southern is Truman Capote. When dining at Café Nicholson, he would request that I make him some biscuits. Southern is a guinea hen, a bird of African origin. They live in trees around the house and make a big noise if strangers come around. Like any game bird, they have to be aged before cooking. They have a delicious flavor and are best when cooked in a clay pot with butter, herbs, onions, and mushrooms.

Southern is Bessie Smith. Give me a pig foot and a bottle of beer. Southern is a great yeast roll, the dough put down overnight to rise and the next morning shaped into rolls and baked. Served hot from the oven, they are light as a dandelion in a high wind. Southern is a sun dog⁶ – something like a rainbow, or the man in the moon – on a late summer afternoon.

Southern is a mint julep. A goblet of crushed ice with a sprig of mint tucked in the side of the glass, a plain sugar syrup the consistency of kerosene poured over the ice, then a jigger of bourbon. Stir and bruise the mint with a silver spoon. Sip and enjoy. Southern is a hot summer day that brings on a violent thunderstorm, cooling the air and bringing up smells of the earth that tempt us to eat the soil. Southern is Tennessee Williams and *Streetcar*. Southern is a springhouse filled with perishables kept cool by a stream running through. And a spring keeper⁷ – a salamander – is there, watching over.

Southern is Bourbon Street and Louis Armstrong. Southern is a seafood gumbo of crab, okra, tomatoes, scallions,

onions, green pepper, bacon, garlic, and herbs. Southern is fresh-made corn fritters, light and crisp enough to fly away. Southern is an okra pancake in a cornmeal batter. Southern is a platter of deviled crabs prepared with soaked slices of white bread torn and mixed with chopped onion, fine-cut scallions, melted butter, fresh-ground black pepper, cayenne, eggs, and the best crabmeat. Baked in the oven, served hot, a morsel to die over. Southern is a pitcher of lemonade, filled with slices of lemon and a big piece of ice from the icehouse, and served with buttermilk cookies. Southern is a delicious chicken salad at a bride's luncheon.

Southern is a bowl of shrimp paste, rich in butter, shrimp, Sherry, spices, and lemon juice. Blended to a soft consistency and served over a plate of grits, a delicious breakfast treat. Southern is a barbecued pig that was cooked for hours and served with a tomato- or vinegar-based sauce, as well as coleslaw, potato salad, baked beans, hush puppies, and iced tea. Southern is a bowl of homemade peach ice cream, served during the peach season. Southern is Richard Wright and his "Bright and Morning Star." Southern is an oyster roast. Guests are presented with white gloves for shucking and pots of melted butter. Southern is leftover pieces of boiled ham trimmed and added to a saucepan of heavy cream set on the back of the stove to mull and bring out the ham flavor, then served spooned over hot biscuits, with poached eggs on the side.

Southern is hunting season, a time that men take off to hunt rabbits, squirrel, opossum, deer, quail, partridge, plover, and dove. We used to trap snowbirds⁸ and enjoy a pan of them baked. Southern is a Brunswick stew of squirrel or rabbit, beans, corn, tomatoes, onions, herbs, fresh-ground black pepper, and salt. Long cooking results in a great stew. Southern is a wild pig served with pork liver sauce, peanut sauce, rice for spooning the sauces over, and spicy sauces for the sliced pork.

Southern is Thomas Wolfe and *Of Time and the River*. Southern is Craig Claiborne, for more than twenty-five years the distinguished food critic of *The New York Times*. Southern is a country steak smothered with onions on a Sunday morning, with gravy and spoon bread to spoon the gravy over. Southern is she-crab soup, thick with crab

5. Miss Lewis strongly felt that if you used cheap Sherry, "you have to add so much you kill the taste of whatever you are cooking."

6. A sun dog is a bright white patch of light that appears when the sun is low on the horizon, shining through thin, high ice (cirrus) clouds. Sometimes it exhibits a spectrum of colors.

7. Salamanders are called spring keepers because they're found in clean-running springs. Folk belief holds that if you kill the spring keeper, the spring will run dry.

8. Snowbirds are juncos, a type of finch.

eggs and crabmeat, served with benne biscuits. Southern is a lemon-flavored pound cake served with brandied peaches and homemade blackberry wine.

Southern is a moss rose, a camellia, a buttercup, a tea olive tree sending its fragrance through the air and into the kitchen. Southern is the call of the whip-poor-will at midnight.⁹ Southern is Reynolds Price discussing his mother's cooking.¹⁰ Southern is a pot of boiling coffee sending its aroma out to greet you on your way in from the barn. Coffee was always served piping hot, so much so that if someone talked too much, they were told, "Save your breath to cool your coffee."

Southern is a walk along the streams in September to find out if the fox grapes are ripening. The aroma they send out is a sign of where they are. Southern is Scott Peacock, one of the South's most creative young chefs. Southern is weeks of canning, pickling, and preserving – cucumber pickle, artichoke pickle, pear pickle, tomato pickle, watermelon rind pickle, citron preserves, green tomato preserves, fig preserves, cherry preserves, grape conserve, crab apple jelly, wild blackberry jelly, fox grape jelly, quince jelly, guava jelly, wild plum jelly, wild strawberry preserves (the best).

Southern is Christmas, a wonderful time of the winter. In the early history of the South, there was no Christmas tree. Beautiful flowers such as camellias were used in Charleston. And it was a German professor – a refugee – who, while boarding with a family in Williamsburg, brought them stories of Christmas decorations in his native Germany.

Our house was decorated with running cedar branches with juniper berries. Red tissue-paper bells were hung throughout the house, lending a festive air. On the sideboard were the Christmas foods such as fruitcake, homemade candies – divinity, peanut brittle, and ribbon squares – nuts, oranges, and coconut made into confections.

Christmas was ushered in before daylight with the thunderous noise of Roman candles – our father waking the community from its sleep. Southern is a delicious plate of sautéed oysters, cream, Sherry, salt, cayenne, fresh-ground black pepper, salsify, a spoon of butter in

the bottom of the bowl, and a garnish of chervil. Southern is hoppin' John – black-eyed peas cooked in hog's-head stock – served with a dish of greens on New Year's Day. This is to bring good luck in the new year to come. Southern is Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., with a dream.

Southern is William Faulkner, *Intruder in the Dust*.¹¹ I met him in Café Nicholson. Upon our meeting, he wanted to know if I had studied cooking in Paris. Southern is a beautiful dish of fried chicken, cooked carefully in home-rendered lard and butter with pieces of country ham added, then served with a brown gravy spooned over spoon bread. Southern is Elizabeth Spencer's writing in *The Light in the Piazza*.¹²

Southern is desserts galore – coconut cake, caramel layer cake, black walnut whiskey cake, groom's wedding cake,¹³ fig pudding, mincemeat pie, lemon meringue pie, fried apple pies, damson plum pie, rhubarb pie with orange zest, peach cobbler, blackberry cobbler, blackberry roly-poly with blackberry sauce.

Southern is Eugene Walter,¹⁴ deep in Alabama, a Renaissance man, a gourmet, always with a brilliant thought. Southern is Marie Rudisill,¹⁵ author of a cookbook that emulates the friends she grew up with, cooked with, and loved. Southern is Carson McCullers in *The Member of the Wedding*.¹⁶ Southern is all the unsung heroes who passed away in obscurity.

So many great souls have passed off the scene. The world has changed. We are now faced with picking up the pieces and trying to put them into shape, document them so the present-day young generation can see what southern food was like. The foundation on which it rested was pure ingredients, open-pollinated seed – planted and replanted for generations – natural fertilizers. We grew the seeds of what we ate, we worked with love and care.

This piece is reprinted with permission from Steve Peacock and the Estate of Edna Lewis, originally published in Gourmet, January 2008.

9. Folk tradition also holds that the call of a whip-poor-will at midnight is a portent of death.

10. Southern writer Reynolds Price (born 1933) described pimento cheese "homemade by Mother" as the peanut butter of his childhood. Most of the versions found in southern supermarkets are, says Price, "made apparently from congealed insecticides."

11. Faulkner wrote *Intruder in the Dust* in 1948 as a response to growing racial tensions in the South.

12. *The Light in the Piazza*, by Mississippi native Elizabeth Spencer (born 1921), explores the ties that bind.

13. A traditional groom's wedding cake is a white fruitcake.

14. For a loving (and hilarious) tribute to the multifaceted Eugene Walter (1921 – 1998), visit southernfoodways.com.

15. Marie Rudisill (1911 – 2006) is best known for *Fruitcake: Memories of Truman Capote & Sook*.

16. In *The Member of the Wedding*, McCullers writes: "Now hopping-john was F. Jasmine's very favorite food. She had always warned them to wave a plate of rice and peas before her nose when she was in her coffin ... for if a breath of life was left in her, she would sit up and eat, but if she smelled the hopping-john, and did not stir, then they could just nail down the coffin and be certain she was truly dead."