



Dear Camper:

We are thrilled that our SFA friends are joining us for CAMP BACON! As your host SFA committee, we have tried to list places that are unique to this area. All of the restaurants listed are owned or run by fellow SFA members. This compilation of wonderful places is geared to make your self-guided tour of Louisville and Central Kentucky a more enjoyable one. We strongly suggest that, unless noted otherwise, you make reservations. We know you will experience our special Bluegrass hospitality throughout the weekend, but if you mention that you are an SFA member, you may receive something a little extra.

As you know, Dan Philips--Grateful Palate proprietor, Bacon of the Month Club mastermind, the man *Food & Wine* dubbed Captain Bacon--will serve as our guest curator on Friday night. (Read the attached profile of him by Pete Wells.)

Featured chefs include Joe Castro of the English Grill (leader of the pack), John Castro of Winston's, Dean Corbett of Equus, Jim Gerhardt of Limestone, Ouita Michel of Holly Hill Inn, Jared Richardson of Wallace Station, and Anoosh Shariat of Park Place.

Featured bacons will be presented by way of oral history overviews between courses.

Generous supporters include the Brown Hotel; Estes Public Relations; The Grateful Palate; Kentucky Proud, Kentucky Department of Agriculture; Kentucky Cattlemen's Association; Louisville Convention & Visitors Bureau; Kentucky Pork Producers; and the West Kentucky Grower Co-Op.

N.B.: A late addition to the lineup is Justin McNamee of Samuel's Gorge Winery, one of the rising stars of McLaren Vale, Australia. Captain Bacon imports his wines into the United States. Justin will join us too, and he and Dan will pour three wines: Shiraz, Tempranillo, and Grenache. Your tongue will rejoice.

N.B.II: This will be a decidedly relaxed event. By way of this letter, the SFA offers suggestions of where to go and what to do, but all transportation and arrangements and reservations--everything you do exceptional of the Friday night dinner--you do on your own. Fear not, chances are good that you'll recognize a few friendly faces in most any crowd.

Here's the plan for Friday night:

Arrive at the Brown Hotel, 335 West Broadway in downtown Louisville, between 1:00 and 6:00 p.m. on Friday, September 16th. Stop by the SFA table in the lobby. (The table will also be open from 9:00 to 11:00 a.m. on Saturday.) We'll answer any questions, give you a table assignment for dinner, and hand off a bag of goodies. Return at 6:30 p.m. to hear Dan Philips talk of how he developed a taste for great bacon. At that time, we'll also offer you a wee dram of something to drink.

Dinner follows at 7:00 p.m. in the Crystal Ballroom. (Regarding appropriate dress, shy away from jeans and shorts and you're okay.) Between courses Fred Sauceman, a member of the SFA board of directors, will showcase a number of oral histories collected by SFA oral historian Amy Evans, who has been crisscrossing the state, interviewing Kentucky's artisanal bacon producers.

Here's the plan for Friday day and Saturday:

For those arriving early and/or staying late, we have assembled a roster of people and places to visit. Offerings are organized alphabetically within three categories: Downtown/Highlands (areas within a 5-10 minute drive of the hotel); Nearby Neighborhoods (still within Louisville but 10-25 minutes); and Beyond (drives of an hour or less).

Warmest Regards,

Jamie Estes and the SFA Louisville Planning Committee
(Jamie@estespr.com; 502-553-8397)

CHEFS

Get to know the women and men who will fry your bacon:

Dean Corbett

Dean Corbett of Equus was among the first chefs to focus upon local and regional farm products from bourbon to baseball-sized squash, goat cheese to home-grown tomatoes. Four years ago, the Louisville native opened Jack's Lounge, just around the corner from Equus. Named for his late father and business partner, the lounge offers a more relaxed and whimsical menu, but with the same high quality ingredients.

Joe Castro

Joe Castro, executive chef of the Brown Hotel, went to Transylvania University. During the junior year of his hospitality internship at Taiwan's elegant Lai Lai Shangri-la Hotel, he foresaw his future in the restaurant industry. At the English Grill, Castro takes advantage of regional ingredients and remembers the lessons his mother taught him about seasonal produce. He has been featured in *Gourmet* and *Southern Living*.

John Castro

John Castro, brother of Joe, is executive chef of Winston's, the restaurant at Sullivan University's National Center for Hospitality Studies in Louisville, where he is also an instructor. Raised in southern Indiana, his mother brought Kentucky traditions to the table while his father's background was Philippine.

Jim Gerhardt

Co-owner of Limestone restaurant, Gerhardt, a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America, boasts an impressive vitae including stints at The Mansion on Turtle Creek and Louisville's Seelbach Hilton Hotel. He is a past nominee for the Best Chef in the Southeast award from the James Beard Foundation. Among his heralded dishes is ravioli with country ham, mushrooms, and artichokes.

Ouita Michel

Ouita Michel grew up in Lexington, Kentucky. A graduate of the Culinary Institute of America, she purchased the Holly Hill Inn, a historic property and restaurant in 2001. Today, Ouita and her husband Chris continue the rich heritage of the Inn, not only calling it their restaurant, but also their home.

Jared Richardson

A native of Whitesburg, Kentucky, and a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America, Richardson is the proprietor of Wallace Station, a restaurant and traditional foods commissary located on the Bluegrass Scenic Byway between Midway and Versailles, Kentucky.

Anoosh Shariat

Anoosh Shariat, a native of Iran, spent years cooking in Germany, Switzerland, and in the American Southwest before moving to Louisville. He has received much attention for his select vegetarian dishes, but he's still keen on Camp Bacon. Says writer Ronni Lundy, "Nobody, but nobody can make a plate of food both look and taste as gorgeous as Chef Anoosh Shariat."

Gastronomic Possibilities in Louisville and Beyond:

DOWNTOWN/ HIGHLANDS

610 Magnolia

610 Magnolia
Louisville, KY 40208
(502) 636-0783
www.610magnolia.com

Edward Lee's approach is steeped in the farm-to-table agriculture movement. His seasonally-inspired six-course menu changes weekly. Guests may dine in the contemporary main dining room or request a table in the walled garden. The restaurant is open for dinner Thursday through Saturday.

Browning's Restaurant & Brewery

401 E. Main Street
Louisville, KY 40202
(502) 515-0174

Named after the legendary Pete Browning (the Louisville Slugger himself) and nestled in legendary Louisville Slugger Field, Browning's offers hand-crafted beer from Tennessee brewmaster Brian Reymiller. Anoosh Shariat reinvents pub food. Open for lunch and dinner seven days.

English Grill

The Brown Hotel
335 W. Broadway
Louisville, KY 40202
(502) 583-1234
www.thebrownhotel.com

Located in the historic Brown Hotel, Joe Castro and his culinary team pay homage to place and terroir. Despite the name, the fare is more reminiscent of fine country cooking enlivened with robust and fresh flavors. The English Grill is open for dinner Monday through Saturday.

Highlands FarmWorks Market

Bardstown Road Presbyterian Church
1722 Bardstown Road
Louisville, KY 40205

Nestled in the middle of Louisville's restaurant row, this lively farmer's market offers everything from artisanal cheese to colorful flowers and the best produce in the region. Open from 8:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. on Saturdays.

Lilly's Restaurant

1147 Bardstown Road
Louisville, KY 40204
(502) 451-0447
www.lillyslapeche.com

Lilly's chef/owner Kathy Cary has been promoting local farmers with just-picked produce and free-range meats since she opened her restaurant more than 15 years ago. A James Beard nominee, Cary was guest chef at the 2000 Southern Foodways Symposium. Try her take-away Benedictine spread. Open for lunch and dinner Tuesday through Saturday.

Louisville Stoneware

731 Brent Street
Louisville, KY 40204
(502) 582-1900
www.louisvillestoneware.com

Shop until you drop at Louisville Stoneware, makers of hand-crafted and hand-painted stoneware including the famous Hot Brown plate. Ask for the SFA special, and you will receive 20 percent off all merchandise, even seconds! Open until 5:00 p.m. seven days a week.

Lynn's Paradise Cafe

984 Barret Avenue
Louisville, KY 40204
(502) 583-3447
www.lynnsparisecafe.com

Start your day off with a hearty southern breakfast prepared by Sara Gibbs at super funky, super fun Lynn's Paradise Café. Specialties include bourbon ball French toast and Bloody Marys. This hallmark breakfast spot sports a twelve-foot tea pot out front and is home to a curious gift shop called the World of Swirl. Reservations strongly suggested for Saturday morning breakfast. Tell 'em you're with the SFA. Open for breakfast, lunch, and dinner seven days a week.

Muth's Candy Store

630 E. Market St.
Louisville, KY 40202
(502) 585-2952
www.muthscandy.com

An old-fashioned candy store, open since 1921, Muth's Candies is a Louisville institution famous for, among other treats, the modjeska, an irresistible combination of a soft marshmallow gem and a light caramel coating. Also look for bourbon balls and pecan brittle. Open until 4:00 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday.

Park Place on Main

401 E Main Street
Louisville, KY 40202
(502) 515-0172
www.parkplaceonmain.com

Stop by Park Place in the heart of Louisville's Slugger Field and enjoy a bourbon cocktail mixed by spirits guru Jerry Slater. Anoosh Shariat's regionally-inspired global cuisine includes veal loin with white grits cake. Open for lunch Monday through Friday, and dinner Saturday, too.

Shuckman's Fish Company & Smokery

3001 West Main Street
Louisville, Kentucky 40212
(502) 775-6478
www.kysmokedfish.com

Smoker of Kentucky trout and catfish, harvester of Kentucky spoonfish caviar, and curer of fish by immersion in age-old bourbon, Shuckman's Fish Company & Smokery is a fourth-generation Louisville institution. Owner Lewis Shuckman has been featured in the *New York Times* and *Food & Wine*. Call first for a weekday appointment and bring a cooler.

NEARBY NEIGHBORHOODS**Equus Restaurant**

122 Sears Avenue
Louisville, KY 40207
(502) 897-9721

Equus, a luxe restaurant with a horsey theme, has been producing regionally-inspired cuisine for 25 years. *Courier-Journal* restaurant critic Susan Reigler wrote, "The service will make you feel like a pampered Derby winner." Try the pork chop with cornbread stuffing and peach rhubarb chutney. Located in the heart of St. Matthews, Equus is a short drive from downtown. Open for dinner Monday through Saturday.

Limestone Restaurant

10001 Forest Green Boulevard
Louisville, KY 40223
(502) 426-7477
www.limestonerestaurant.net

Jim Gerhardt and Mike Cunha have created and honed the concept of “new Southern cooking with old Southern charm.” Classic Southern recipes are born again with locally produced ingredients. Limestone is located in Louisville’s East End. Open for lunch and dinner Monday through Friday, and dinner Saturday, too.

Party Mart

4808 Brownsboro Road
Louisville, KY 40207
(502) 895-4446

Planning to bring home a few bottles of Kentucky’s best? Say a fifth of thirteen-year-old Van Winkle Family Reserve Rye or an inscribed bottle of Woodford Reserve Distiller’s Select bourbon? This suburban megastore is the place to go. Open until 10:00 p.m. Monday through Saturday, and until 7:00 p.m. on Sunday. Closer in, try Old Town Liquors at 1529 Bardstown Road, (502) 451-8591.

Taste of Kentucky

11800 Shelbyville Road
Louisville, KY 40243
(502) 895-2733
www.tasteofkentucky.com

Take home a little bit of Kentucky. A Taste of Kentucky has been selling Kentucky-inspired food, arts and crafts for more than 25 years. Whether you want a bottle of bourbon barbecue sauce or Derby merchandise, Taste of Kentucky offers two locations: Mall St. Matthews just off the Watterson Expressway and Village Square on Shelbyville Road in Middletown. If you are going to Midway, both locations are on the way. Hours vary, but they're open seven days a week.

Winston's Restaurant

Sullivan University
 3101 Bardstown Road
 Louisville, KY 40205
 (502) 456-0980
www.sullivan.edu/louisville/national/winstons.html

Located at the Sullivan University's National Center for Hospitality Studies, Winston's restaurant is led by John Castro. Under Castro, students from the Center prepare and serve guests such dishes as pan-seared breast of English ringneck pheasant. The restaurant is located near the Watterson Expressway about 15 minutes from the hotel. Open Friday and Saturday for lunch and dinner, Sunday for brunch.

BEYOND**Capriole Goat Cheese**

10329 Newcut Road
 Greenville, IN 47124
 (812) 923-9408
www.capriolegoatcheese.com

Owner and cheese maker Judy Schad's passion and spirit can be seen in every ounce of fresh, ripened, and aged chèvre that she produces. Her cheeses have won countless awards and are sold in gourmet stores throughout the city. If you would like a tour and tasting, please call to make a reservation. Located in Greenville, Indiana, about 30 minutes from downtown Louisville.

Equus Run Vineyards

1280 Moores Mill Road
 Midway, KY 40347
 (859) 846-WINE
www.equusrunvineyards.com

Nestled amidst stone fences and rolling fields of bluegrass in the town of Midway, this winery is a great stop for an afternoon glass. Tours, which include the vineyard, flower gardens, and renovated tobacco barn turned wine production facility, are available at 1:30 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday at a nominal cost. Wines produced include Chardonnay, Riesling, and Cabernet Sauvignon. Less than an hour's drive from the hotel.

Holly Hill Inn

426 N Winter Street
Midway, KY 40347
(859) 846-4732
www.hollyhillinn.com

Owner and chef Ouita Michel has been touted for her Kentucky-inspired cuisine and use of local regional products in such publications as the *New York Times* and *Bon Appetit*. While her menu changes monthly, you can count on at least 80 percent of her dishes to be local. Located in Midway, about 10 minutes from the Woodford Reserve Distillery. Open for lunch and dinner Wednesday through Saturday, brunch on Sunday.

Smith-Berry Vineyard and Winery

Hwy 202 Drennon Road
New Castle, KY 40050
(502) 845-7091
www.smithberrywinery.net

Smith-Berry Vineyard and Winery is a small family farm located in North Central Kentucky. The Smith family turned their cattle and tobacco farm into a winery that now makes, among others, Chardonel, Vidal Blanc, and Norton wines. Located about 45 minutes north of the hotel in Henry County. Open Tuesday through Saturday until 6:00 p.m.

Wallace Station

3854 Old Frankfort Pike
Versailles, KY 40383
(859) 846-5161
www.hollyhillinn.com

Wallace Station is the epitome of the old country store. You can step up to the counter and order a number of sandwiches and sides. This is a popular hang out and watering hole for locals. The Liars Club convenes at 4:00 p.m. daily. You'll find them on Old Frankfort Pike just outside of Midway. Open Monday through Saturday until 6:00 p.m., Sunday until 4:00 p.m.

Woodford Reserve Distillery

7855 McCracken Pike

Versailles, KY 40383

(859) 879-1812

www.woodfordreserve.com

Founded in 1812, the Woodford Reserve Distillery is America's oldest operating bourbon distillery. This 42-acre landmark is nestled in the rolling hills and horse farms of central Kentucky. Visitors are rewarded with tours that explicate the history and heritage of America's true native spirit, bourbon. After the tour, sample their bourbon balls. Lunch is also available on the porch. Located an hour's drive east of the hotel. Open Tuesday through Sunday until 4:30 or 5:00 p.m.

And now for another view:

A Six-Pack of Reasons to Show Up Hungry (and Thirsty) in Louisville

What Southern city deserves more attention than it gets? In other words, what city boasts a great food and drink scene that doesn't get its due? Easy, it's Louisville, Kentucky. A few reasons:

- 1) Louisville is in the state of Kentucky, which has the good sense to promote local provender by giving rebates to chefs who BUY BLUEGRASS. Jim Gerhardt, chef and co-owner of Limestone restaurant may take best advantage of the program. His reliance upon Kentucky-raised red-claw crawfish, tiger prawns, and paw paws earns back about 500 bucks a month.
- 2) There survives a single Ollie's Trolley, a remnant of a short-lived burger chain built around the personality of Ollie Gleichenhaus, a grease jockey from Miami Beach. Imagine a burger that somehow tastes of salt and sand and sea. A burger that evokes a randy old man who chomps on cigars, cusses a blue streak, and appreciates the sinuous ideal of the feminine physique. An Ollieburger tastes like that. Only more so. (978 S. 3rd Street, 502-583-5214)
- 3) The Suburban Social Club is but one of the fraternal organizations that still stage Saturday afternoon fish fries, serving Icelandic cod, sprinkled with marinated onions, sandwiched between slices of rye. (www.suburban740.org/socialclub.html; 3901 S. 3rd Street)
- 4) Louisville was *once* home to a fellow named Jake who ran a bar called Jake's Club Reno. He's gone now, but I remember him, at age eighty-four, leaning into the bar with a bottle of Old Grand Dad, pouring from his shoulder as if he had just torn his rotator cuff on that last Manhattan, smiling at me and saying, "Jake's the name, whiskey's the game."
- 5) If you're lucky, you'll get invited to a gathering hosted by Jerry Slater, (general manager of Browning's restaurant at Slugger Field) and have the chance to watch as he weaves through the crowd like a liquor sprite--a man-purse stuffed with bottles slung over his shoulder--pouring tastes of ten-year-old rye and twenty-year-old bourbon.
- 6) On the drive home to your hotel, you're likely to get turned around and find yourself in proximity of the old stockyards, and you're likely to glimpse the sign in front of the Do Drop Inn, the one that heralds "NICE PEOPLE DANCING TO GOOD COUNTRY MUSIC." (1032 Story Avenue, 502-582-9327)

-- JTE

A bit of reading:

Captain Bacon

by Pete Wells

Throughout most of my twenties, for reasons that would probably make me laugh today if I could remember them, I was a vegetarian. For nearly a decade, I wouldn't go near a porterhouse or a lambchop or a sparerib. I always made an exception for bacon, though. People thought I was kidding when I explained that bacon wasn't a meat, it was a condiment. But I was serious: Bacon seemed to me like pure flavor--not animal, vegetable or mineral but some intensified, distilled essence of sweetness, salt and smoke. I'm not sure I was wrong, either. A recent cookbook was titled *Everything Tastes Better with Bacon*, and it's true. Everything is better with bacon. Even vegetarianism.

It stands to reason, then, that Dan Philips is one of my few heroes. Philips is the founder of the Grateful Palate, a wine importer and mail-order epicurean-foods company perhaps best known as the perpetrator of the Bacon of the Month Club. The Bacon of the Month Club works like the Book of the Month Club, except that the book club mails you some fat best-seller that sits on a shelf until your next yard sale, while a pound of bacon from the Grateful Palate usually finds itself in a hot skillet before the mailman can say good-bye. One customer wrote Philips to say that each time a new shipment arrives, her husband dances around the box. The Grateful Palate now offers more than 30 artisanal bacons from all over the United States, and collectively they outsell everything else in the catalog, including stunning bottles of Australian Shiraz and more esoteric treats, like crimson pumpkinseed oil from Austria.

Philips, a native Californian, grew up eating bacon almost every day and still does, but he was nonetheless surprised by the size and excitability of the audience for it. He knew something powerful was at work, but he wasn't sure what. I don't know much about bacon, other than how it tastes, he told me recently. Then he said that he was thinking of calling on some of his favorite producers to see if he could learn why their bacons are so different from one another. Western Kentucky and Tennessee are particularly rich in makers of country bacon--pork bellies that are cured with salt and sugar, hung to dry and then saturated with hickory smoke.

This suggested to Philips a road trip, starting in Louisville and meandering south-by-southwest down country roads in search of knowledge, wisdom, and pork products. I didn't beg. Perhaps I did drop a few dark warnings about the dangers facing the solitary hunter of breakfast meats in isolated rural areas. A few days later, Philips sent an e-mail inviting me to ride shotgun on his bacon safari. I have a few stipulations, he wrote. 1. I must always be addressed as Captain Bacon. 2. No stopping for cheap hookers. 3. You must bathe at least once every day. Other than that, I'm easy to travel with.

I met Captain Bacon at 6 a.m. in front of the Seelbach hotel in Louisville. With full cups of coffee and empty stomachs, we charted a course for Bremen, Kentucky, where Charlie Gatton makes a product he calls Father's Country Bacon. As we crawled along a two-lane blacktop past cornfields and convenience stores (Marlboros \$2.10!!!), I mentioned a legendary country-ham producer I'd heard of down in Trigg County, hinting strongly that I might go on a bathing strike unless I was promised I'd leave the state with a ham in my suitcase. "Don't worry," he said. "All the bacon guys we're going to see also make hams." The two meats are cured and smoked in essentially the same way, he explained, but then hams are aged for months while bacon is ready in a couple of weeks. "If the same people make both things," I asked, "then how come country ham gets talked about as an artisanal product, while bacon is just bacon?"

The Captain thought it over. "I don't really know," he said. I think it's because people buy hams for Christmas, for Easter. A ham is an event. Bacon is more of an everyday thing. But toothpaste is an everyday thing, and so are socks. Neither could lure me to the back roads of Kentucky before sunrise. Bacon is an everyday thing, but a mystery, too--an everyday mystery.

About three hours out of Louisville, we turned at a sign that read Gatton Farms. Home of famous country hams, bacon & smoked sausage. On our left was a white shingle farmhouse planted in the shade of a 100-year-old cypress tree. To our right was a white fence whose pickets were topped by miniature silhouettes of hams. The door of a low-slung redbrick structure swung open, and Charlie Gatton, Jr., stepped out to welcome us. A born salesman, Gatton took over his family's cured-meats business two years ago, after his father died. Since then, he has experimented with new products, like smoked rib-eyes, and new ways of reaching customers, including a Web site and appearances on the Home Shopping Network. "Bacon is good for you," he tells viewers. "When you cook it, most of the calories melt away." The Home Shopping phone operator who hopes for a relaxing day at work is in for a bitter disappointment when Charlie Gatton gets in front of the cameras.

Gatton told us cheerfully that we'd come on a good day. Just that morning, he'd received more than a ton of fresh bacon from his packer in Missouri. "Dan, would you like to help us cure some?" he asked. Clearly, Philips couldn't refuse and still call himself Captain Bacon, so he followed Gatton to a fluorescent-lit back room where half a dozen men worked while Hank Williams, Jr., sang "Family Tradition" on the radio. The sides of bacon, cut from the bellies of freshly slaughtered hogs only the day before, were piled up in rubber bins on the floor. Another bin was filled with Gatton's curing rub: salt, brown sugar, white sugar, and tiny amounts of nitrite, a preservative that helps the meat keep its alluringly rosy complexion. "You just rub the cure all over with your hands," Gatton said. "No, don't brush off the extra. You want to leave some on there."

Philips coated a slab with the sand-colored rub until it looked like a boogie board after a day at the beach. Then Gatton laid it down in an empty bin so the salt could begin sinking into the meat and drawing out the water. As the meat dries, its flavor gets more concentrated, giving country bacon the depth and intensity that sets it apart from its gentler, brine-cured cousins. “Our bacon loses about 12 percent of its weight in water when we cure it,” Gatton said. “Supermarket bacon has water added, with needles that pump it full of brine. When I go on Home Shopping, I’ll cook a strip of supermarket bacon. It shrinks to half the size of ours.”

Back out front in a small retail shop decorated with 14 blue ribbons from the Kentucky State Fair, the Captain had a private word with Gatton while I chatted with Gatton’s wife, Lori. She doesn’t have her husband’s polished spiel, but she is a steadfast believer in the mystery of bacon. Whenever she leaves Kentucky, she packs a little plastic bag of Father’s Country Pepper Bacon, cooked and crumbled, because she has discovered that some restaurants of otherwise high quality “don’t put any bacon on their salad at all,” she told me. “And if I can’t have bacon on my salad, I just don’t care about it.”

We said our good-byes and started for Owensboro to spend the night; nobody has yet thought to build a hotel in Bremen, Kentucky. In fact, nobody has built much of anything in Bremen except barns and grain silos and squat brick houses and places of worship. One church we passed had the kind of sign on its front lawn that you see outside car lots and flea markets. “To go nowhere fast,” it read, “follow the crowd.”

“This area reminds me of where my mother grew up,” the Captain said. She was from Eastern Kentucky. Appalachia. Her grandfather made bacon, and she used to cook it for me every morning. We went back a few years ago to find her house. It’s mountainous there, but somehow it looks a lot like this--kind of bleak. “Where was your father from?” I asked. “Hungary. He was an Orthodox Jew. He’s the reason I got into wine and food. He was a doctor, and he thought he needed to cultivate an interest in the finer things, so we always had expensive wines at dinner. When I was 14, I took a wine-tasting class, just so I could know more about it than he did. I was always very competitive with him.”

That this rivalry with his Jewish father set young Dan Philips on a path that has now brought him to his mother’s home state in search of the flesh of the swine struck me as material that would keep a psychoanalyst busy for years. We set out early the next morning for Greenville, Kentucky, home of the Scott family. As we glided south past soybean fields and horse pastures, Captain Bacon phoned for directions. She said we look for the turn where it used to say Scott Road, “until someone stole the sign,” he said. Scott Road, when we finally found it, led us straight to Scott Hams, and to Leslie and June Scott. Like most small smokehouses, the Scotts’ operation grew out of a family farm; Les’s grandfather cured hams and bacon at hog-slaughtering time each winter. Les, a talkative man in a cap from the American Cured Meat Championship, raises bulls now as a hobby. “Kept pigs once,” Les said. “We had ‘em down on the other side of that hill there. The guy who built the pen for us said, “Don’t worry, the smell will never reach you all the way up here.” Well, the very first day we had those pigs, the wind was blowing straight toward the house. It was a real hot day, so we had all the windows open.

The Scotts showed us the parts of the process we'd missed at Gatton Farms. We saw the refrigerated lockers where the bacon ages for two weeks after it's rubbed with the dry cure, and then the smokehouse where it hangs on wood scaffolds for another week in the company of smoldering hickory logs and sawdust. Les Scott's cure is as simple as they come: brown sugar and salt. His bacon can shade in color from pink to nut brown, since Scott uses no nitrites. The Captain asked him why. "My people didn't do it," Les said flatly. "My dad never did it back on the farm. So I don't do it."

I had now sampled the two smokiest bacons the Grateful Palate sells, and there was no mistaking one for the other. Gatton Farms' was complex and "gnarly" (the Captain's word); and its flavor lingered and developed like a Polaroid coming into focus. Scott's was more straightforward, lucid: If it were a painting it would have been called "Still Life with Smoke, Salt and Pork." Les Scott's bacon is cured about 10 days longer than Charlie Gatton's and gets a little less smoke. It doesn't have the white sugar Gatton's has, either. But I wasn't sure that the cure and the smoking technique were the whole story. Les said he believed there's more going on, that bacon is changed by the age and the shape and the smell of the rooms where it's made. "I think each smokehouse has its own personality," he said.

Tripp Country Hams is about an hour north of Memphis in Brownsville, Tennessee, one of those small Southern towns centered around a courthouse square. Charlie Tripp works out of a cavernous facility built by his grandfather, who hauled the sand for the building's mortar in a mule cart. The building started life as a meat locker, where, in the days before electric refrigeration, farmers could store what they'd butchered. Somewhere along the line, Tripp's father "started curing a few hams," Charlie said. Today, Tripp's bacon is a favorite among Grateful Palate customers--perhaps because Tripp puts cinnamon and cayenne pepper in his dry cure. Philips asked if his family has always had the recipe. Tripp shook his head. "No. We were doing it one way, and it made 'a good bacon,'" he said. Good, not great. "But there was this old man who used to have a stand on the side of Highway 70, and he did a little curing. He said, 'I've got a recipe that makes a delicious bacon.'" So eventually he gave it to me, and that's the one I've been using ever since.

The genius of this mystery man's secret formula became clear a few minutes later, when Charlie Tripp invited us back to his house, an antebellum mansion across the square. His wife, Judy, had baked biscuits and fried some ham and bacon. In the bubbling oil, the spices floated free of the bacon's edges and coated the entire slice. The low burn of cayenne, as many snack companies know, has the effect of making you want to eat more and more, and that's just what we did.

Our bacon safari over, we turned back down Highway 70 toward Memphis. The Tripps had warned us not to drive so much as one mile above the speed limit unless we yearned for an extended vacation in Fayette County, so we had time to soak up the roadside scenery. The far western end of Tennessee begins to look and feel like the Mississippi Delta. Trees are smothered in kudzu, cotton fields flat as a concrete floor extend to the horizon, and tilting frame shacks promise cold beer in roughly painted letters. This is the landscape that bred the blues. The blues and bacon: both born of poverty, both looked down on by people who feel it's worth drawing a distinction between high culture and low.

“When Charlie was talking about that old man by the side of the road, I started thinking about Robert Johnson,” Captain Bacon said. “The way Johnson said he’d met the devil on the highway, and the devil showed him how to play guitar. Johnson is the great Mississippi bluesman who turned up in Delta juke joints in the 30s with a fluid, dexterous guitar style no one had seen before. According to legend, he summoned the devil at midnight at an intersection about 100 miles south of here, and traded his soul for guitar lessons. There is, naturally, a rival theory, which holds that Johnson simply went away for a year and practiced. This is the theory I subscribe to, and in fact I believe it's condescension of the worst kind to suggest that a poor black refugee from the Mississippi cotton fields could make himself into a towering musical figure only through the intervention of sorcery. But then I listen to "Me and the Devil Blues" or "Crossroads" and my scalp shivers like the leaves of an aspen when a storm is coming, and even the rationalist in me is tempted to say that the song, if not the singer, is in communication with the supernatural.

I'm also inclined to be a rationalist about bacon, attributing everything to techniques of curing and smoking. But if I eat a slice of bacon made by Charlie Tripp or Charlie Gatton or Leslie Scott, I wonder if Scott isn't right about the personality of the smokehouse, not to mention the man in the smokehouse, and maybe even the figure by the side of the road who whispered an ancient spell in the ear of the man in the smokehouse. Somewhere in these streaky bands of pig meat is a powerful sorcery that can make a grown man dance around a cardboard box, corrupt a pure-minded young vegetarian, and transform the son of an Orthodox Jew into Captain Bacon.

Dan Philips phoned me a few weeks after our trip to say he'd been listening to a lot of blues and eating even more bacon than usual. He'd just received a package in the mail: first-run samples of Grateful Palate private-label bacon, cured and smoked by Charlie Gatton following a recipe that Philips had whispered in his ear on our visit. Philips said he thought it turned out “pretty damn good” and offered to send me a pound. But no matter how many times I asked, he wouldn't tell me exactly how it was made. That, he said, would have to remain a mystery.

Originally published in *Food and Wine*. Reprinted in *Cornbread Nation 3: Foods of the Mountain South*, edited by Ronni Lundy and due this October from the University of North Carolina Press. Pete Wells of Brooklyn, New York, is a senior editor at *Details* and a swell guy.