Gender and Food

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From the dismantling of the peculiar institution of slavery to the arrival of air-conditioning, southern history has been characterized by dramatic change. Throughout the region's history no two areas have remained more frozen in time and tradition than the food southerners eat and the gender of those who cook it.

When English settlers first tried to create a colony off the coast of present-day North Carolina on Roanoke Island in the 1600s, they encountered Native American people whose foodways differed greatly from their own. Memoirs of early white settlers reveal both their surprise and their disdain upon seeing Native American women doing the hard physical labor of planting, harvesting, and preserving food crops, while their men folk pursued the more leisurely tasks of hunting and fishing. Although English colonists of the 1600s and 1700s, and later white frontiersmen of the 1800s, adopted many food traditions from southern Indians that they encountered, few were willing to abandon Old World patterns that shaped their everyday meals. These patterns included a system in which men and women shared in the management of their domestic economy. Once land was cleared and home life became more stable, husbands assumed responsibility for chores outside the home, while wives oversaw food production such as garden plots, dairies, and poultry.

During the opening of the southern frontier white male settlers found themselves alone for months. Gender roles were often abandoned as they explored the western boundaries of southern settlement and were forced to prepare their own meals of deer stew and venison jerky. At times frontiersmen found a tavern or inn that provided food and lodging. Such establishments were usually operated by white women, often widows, whose financial and marital status required that

they work outside the home. Eighteenth-century taverns, such as Ann Vobe's and Christiana Campbell's in Williamsburg, Va., were well known as centers of both hospitality and politics.

By the 1830s gendered responsibilities of men and women defined how daily meals were served in the plantation South. The role of the white "southern lady" stressed a woman's constant devotion to her family. Meals served to both family and guests reflected this devotion and were a means for the white plantation master to demonstrate both his status and his financial success. Historian Bertram Wyatt-Brown argues that southern hospitality, and all that made it possible—the southern lady, slaves, well-equipped kitchens, stocked larders, fine china, silver, and an impressive home—became a central expression of the southern white male's honor. Black male and female slaves not assigned to the big house worked in the fields where they planted, cultivated, and harvested food crops. White plantation masters determined which food crops to plant. Gendered divisions of labor and ritual were present at the table, as well as in the kitchen and the fields. During an afternoon dinner at Shirley Plantation in Virginia in the 1830s a visitor described how Mrs. Carter ladled soup at one end of the table, while her husband carved mutton at the other end. Young male slaves served additional meats and side dishes to the guests. Mr. Carter set out bottles of wine, filling his own glass and passing the bottles on to his guests. The black female cook and her female assistants worked in the kitchen outbuilding, and young slave boys served as runners to carry hot food between the house and the kitchen.

Although Reconstruction-era tales of the Old South depicted plantations in which white women were gracious hostesses who spent their days in leisure and black mammies were good-natured cooks and loyal family retainers, in reality all southern women worked hard to produce meals for white and black families in the plantation South. White mistresses supervised slaves, oversaw the purchase of food supplies, directed seasonal preservation of food, planned menus, and directed dairy and poultry operations. Black cooks and house servants planted and harvested

gardens, cooked three meals a day for the plantation community, cleaned the house, did the laundry, and waited upon guests who frequently visited for extended stays. Slaves were also charged with textile production, sewing, and mending.

Historians Catherine Clinton, Drew Gilpin Faust, and Lee Ann Whites stress the crisis in gender relations brought on by the Civil War, and food was a key part of this crisis. As food supplies were depleted, white women on plantations in the slaveholding South realized that the social contract they held with their husbands was failing. These elite white women no longer believed that, in return for devotion and subservience to their husbands, their families would receive adequate food, clothing, and protection. Women expressed their protests through food riots across the South, as well as in letters asking Confederate officers to release their husbands and sons so that they might return home and support their families.

After the war, newly freed black families established a gendered division of labor that had been denied by slavery. Black women left the fields to focus on their own homes and families, and former house servants finally cooked proper meals for their families, rather than serve them leftovers from the big house.

The complexity of gender and food in this era is described in Charles Frasier's *Cold Mountain*, a novel that focuses on war-wearied southerners in the Appalachian mountains. After her father's death, Ada, a white woman of means, is left to care for her family's derelict mountain farm. She soon realizes that her training in fine needlework, classical piano, and poetry is of little use in helping her feed herself. Ada turns to Ruby, a poor mountain woman, who helps manage the farm. A pesky rooster has terrorized Ada for weeks, and she asks Ruby, "How will we run it off?" While Ada's words still hang in the air, Ruby captures and beheads the unruly beast and soon has it in a stewpot surrounded by gobs of biscuit dough. This scene illustrates how southerners redefined traditional roles connected to food production and preparation during the Civil War.

From the 1890s through the 1920s southerners created a New South that was evident in new lines of commercial food products that appeared in the general store and grocery. Although men and women's roles in food preparation changed little from the end of the Civil War to World War II, access to canned goods, cooking stoves, and electric refrigerators and appliances significantly changed women's roles in the kitchen. Since few could afford to hire black domestic workers, white women found themselves solely responsible for food preparation and all their household chores.

Sharecroppers and farm workers who were forced to move from rural areas to southern towns and cities during the agricultural depression after 1900 were deprived of garden patches, home-canned produce, and meat from hunting and fishing. Among those who remained on farms, men negotiated the sale of livestock for meat, while women supplemented family income with egg and butter money made from selling surplus dairy products and baked goods at weekly curb markets or by selling door-to-door to in-town customers.

After World War II, white middle- and upper-class women throughout the South hired black women as cooks and housekeepers, often for as little as three dollars a week. While black women managed their households, white women volunteered for community and religious organizations, and they raised funds for these groups through food-related events such as church suppers and the sale of community cookbooks. Completely removed from food preparation, white working husbands provided the weekly grocery money and presided over the evening family meal. In the 1960s Southern Progress Corporation in Birmingham celebrated the white southern family in *Southern Living*, a monthly magazine that continues to portray wives as cooks and hostesses and husbands as tenders of the grill and the hunting camp.

The South has always been known for food events that range from political fund-raisers to dinner on the grounds at rural churches. Originating in the work frolics and religious revivals of the antebellum South, these events are marked by a gendered division of labor. House-raisings, corn

shuckings, log rollings, and church picnics all required significant quantities of food to accommodate large crowds. Both white and black men cooked outdoor meals that featured Brunswick stew, catfish, and barbecue. Ingredients and side dishes that accompanied the meat and fish were prepared by female slave cooks and, after Emancipation, by both white and black women. These gendered patterns are still present at boucheries and crawfish boils in the Cajun country of southwestern Louisiana, at oyster roasts along the Chesapeake Bay, at ham suppers in Virginia, and at numerous other outdoor food events. Throughout the South, women remain the primary domestic cooks, while men are public performers who cook for and entertain hungry audiences at special occasions in their community.

Television has dramatically changed the gendered role of southerners with food since the 1970s. Today both men and women reign as the region's finest chefs, caterers, food writers, restaurateurs, and culinary instructors. From rural cafes famous for their meat and three plates to the finest restaurants in New Orleans, men and women share the management and daily operation of southern eateries. Women have entered the ranks of southern food-related corporations such as Viking Range Corporation, *Southern Living*, and White Lily Flour. They have also launched numerous southern internet mail-order businesses that market pound cakes, salted pecans, and catfish pate. Southern specialties once limited to home tables are now delivered overnight across the country by Federal Express. The Rendezvous, a Memphis institution prized for its barbecue, receives orders by phone and online from across the world.

Southern literature, music, film, art, and folkways define mythic characters such as the pampered white southern belle, the nurturing black mammy, the poor white backwoods moonshiner, and the paternalistic white plantation master. Each of these stereotypes reinforces a popular understanding of southern food and the role of women within the kitchen. But reality is infinitely more complex than these stereotypes suggest when we consider foodways and gender in the South.

While men and women are increasingly trading places in culinary worlds throughout the South, traditional gender divisions of southern foodways are far from extinct. Future generations of southerners will likely recognize the familiar sight of male hunters in camouflage, church ladies at their bake sales, men preparing barbecue outdoors, and women preparing the evening meal in their home.

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