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# Gravy



**A FOOD  
LETTER**

**FROM THE SOUTHERN  
FOODWAYS ALLIANCE**



**PUBLICATION OF GRAVY IS UNDERWRITTEN BY MOUNTAIN VALLEY SPRING WATER**

# Gravy

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## ABOUT GRAVY

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### Editor:

Sara Camp Arnold  
[gravy.sfa@gmail.com](mailto:gravy.sfa@gmail.com)

### Designer:

Devin Cox  
[devincox@gmail.com](mailto:devincox@gmail.com)



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# ICONOCLASTS, MISFITS, AND OTHER HEROES

## The Gravy Rebel Issue

*This is an issue about rebels. The South is full of them. We begin by introducing you to Shirley Sherrod, who spoke to us at the Southern Foodways Symposium this past fall. She told us stories about what it took to be a rebel in Albany, Georgia, in the 1960s. She talked about her roles in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the innovative New Communities cooperative farm. She spoke of leading the USDA's Georgia Office of Rural Development to help poor people of all races, only to be falsely accused of favoring African Americans. And she talked about what it takes to be a rebellious farmer now. The following is adapted from Makalé Faber-Cullen's introduction to her talk, interspersed with quotes from Sherrod.*

—Sara Camp Arnold



# SHOULD I STAY OR SHOULD I GO?

*Shirley Sherrod chose to stay*

*by Makalé Faber-Cullen*

*I would pick cotton, and work in the fields, and talk to the sun. I'd say, "You just wait until I get out of high school." ...But as I say to young people, you can never say what you'll never do.*

She was born in Baker County, Georgia, in a town called Newton, in 1947. Her parents were Grace and Hosea Miller. Mr. Miller was a deacon at a local Baptist church, and he was a farmer. In 1964, when Shirley was seventeen, a white farmer shot and killed her father following an argument about livestock. An all-white grand jury acquitted the killer. The murder of her father had a profound impact on Shirley's life, and led to her decision to remain in the South to work for social justice. She "had a mind to stay here," as John Egerton would say.

*On the night of my father's death, I made that commitment to try to work for black people. But it's while doing that work that I realized our issues are not totally about race in the South. It's about being poor.*

Shirley stayed in Georgia for college, majoring in sociology at Albany State and participating in the Civil Rights Movement through the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). After graduating, she married Charles Sherrod, a man of the cloth like her father. Together they collaborated to form various land trusts in southwestern Georgia, the most renowned of which was New Communities, Inc., a 6,000-acre collective farm in Lee County.

*People ask the question, "Why would black people want to stay in the South?" You know, things were so hard, and they worked the land, but it was what they knew.... I can see that they knew that owning land and getting an education were two very important things for their survival and for the survival of their children.*

At the time of its founding, New Communities was the largest parcel of black-owned land in the country. They were open and experimental. New Communities later became the inspiration for community land trusts across the nation. Their work proved to be a model for farmers focused on true sustainability. And it offered new strategies to protect working lands. New Communities didn't have it easy: Agricultural suppliers sold them low-quality fertilizer; white neighbors opposed them; banks and local governments were obstructionist. And if that wasn't enough, a drought came, and New Communities ended. Shirley continued, unbowed, serving next with the Federation of Southern Cooperatives to help black farmers retain their land, then with the Rural Development Leadership Network. In 2009, she became the first African American to direct the USDA's Georgia Office of Rural Development.

*My message was not about hate. And it was not about division. It was about trying to get people to see that we can make the changes in our areas if we work together to do that.*

Shirley now serves as volunteer director for the Southwest Georgia Project for Community Education. It's a SNCC project from back in the day. Shirley's efforts are focused on farm-to-school initiatives. That's not surprising for this mother of two and grandmother of four. One of her current projects is a community kitchen incubator in Baker County, Georgia, doing business in a building that was constructed during the "separate-but-equal" days of her youth.

*There's so much more we need to accomplish if we try to work together. So that's why I've put myself out there, to say, "Look at me. You know, I have every reason to hate, but I don't."*

Throughout her life, Shirley Sherrod has been a long-distance runner for social justice, which makes her just the sort of rebel the SFA admires. 🍷

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*Makalé Faber-Cullen lives in New York City, where she is a proprietor of the shop Wilderness of Wish and heads lore, an ethnographic research consultancy collaborative.*



## WHERE I DISCOVERED NARRATIVE POSSIBILITIES, POSSIBLY

BARBECUE WAS  
MY INSPIRATION

by George Singleton

I BECAME A FICTION WRITER, I'm convinced, because of barbecue. Back in 1975 and 1976, when I was a junior and senior at Greenwood High School in South Carolina, a few friends of mine and I would pile into my Opel and leave the parking lot surreptitiously at 11:55 A.M. in order to drive 2.5 miles to Little Pigs Barbecue, eat quickly, and drive back in time to attend our 12:30 English class. This took planning and guile, of course. First off, students weren't allowed to leave campus at lunch. I don't recall for certain, but I think a student received four demerits for leaving campus without a certified note. At ten demerits he received a three-day suspension. So it took our walking right out of the building, acting like we knew what we were doing, then driving off when the assistant principal wasn't on patrol.

Also, it took knowing the owner of Little Pigs Barbecue, my friend Brother's momma, Ms. Scott. She had our orders ready when we arrived. The pitmaster of sorts—he tended the smoker out back—always smiled at us when we scrambled in, and he said something relatively unintelligible like, “Boys messin’, comin’ here, school, waitin’ for y’all, been stokin’ fire, *ha!*” It wasn't unlike dealing with James Brown at a picnic. One of the pitmaster's legs was shorter than the other, and he had scar-burned arms as lean and tense as steel cables. I don't recall his real name, but people called him Slim or Smoky, or something equally germane. Pigman, maybe. Hock, Snout, Chop.

Listen, if any part of the plan backfired, I had a slew of excuses available, the first of which being that my dentist, Dr. McBride, had his office right next door to Little Pigs, and that I'd handed over my note to the woman at the front office—*she must've lost it*—and that I was getting my teeth cleaned after eating, et cetera. Or—I had a track meet later in the afternoon and I always ran best with a belly full of pulled pork sandwiches topped with coleslaw, drenched in the hot variety of tomato-based sauce. Or—Sir, I graduated last year. I came up with all kinds of lies, and fortunately never had to use any of them.

At the time I didn't know that I wanted to write fiction, though I'd started reading like all get-out, trying to catch up on what I felt like a seventeen- or eighteen-year-old kid was supposed to know before college. There wasn't a bookstore in my hometown—a Waldenbooks opened while I was in college, then closed—and I didn't really have a mentor who could tell me to read anything other than those

godawful classics that start with “Wuthering” and end in “Heights.” Something about barbecue, though, fueled my imagination. I had choices to make: hot, mild, or sweet sauce; how much to order; coleslaw on the bun or on the side? Did I want sliced or pulled pork? What about a combo plate?

The patrons, too, got me to thinking—what other places in South Carolina catered to mill hands, lawyers, men, women, blacks, whites, and runaway high-school students simultaneously? Barbecue, as they say, may have been the great equalizer of my training grounds—crippling choices, strange dialects, and the constant fear of getting caught doing something wrong.

Nothing but inspiration can emanate from this particular recipe.

LAST MONTH I DROVE 3.1 MILES down the 72 bypass in my ex-hometown. I spoke into a Clear Voice Plus Microcassette-corder and listed off the fast food chains I saw on both sides of the road. McDonald’s, Burger King, Hardee’s, Dairy Queen, Sonic, Chick-fil-A, Zaxby’s, Pizza Inn, Pizza Hut, Papa John’s, Little Caesars, KFC, Bojangles’, Captain D’s, et cetera. Outback, Chili’s, Ruby Tuesday, Applebee’s, Moe’s Southwest Grill. Subway, another McDonald’s, Firehouse Subs, Taco Bell, another Bojangles’, Ryan’s, Red Lobster, IHOP, and so on. Huddle House, Waffle House, Cracker Barrel, Shoney’s.

There were *forty-four* of these places over the distance of a 5K run. That’s an average of one per just over a hundred yards. I don’t want to pick on my ex-hometown—I’m sure it’s this way in other places—but what happened to the locally owned restaurants, places where the cooks used some trial-and-error skills, so that the patrons could incorporate some imagination in their own choices?

“Uhhhhh, I’ll have a cheeseburger,” or “Uhhhhh, I’ll have a slice of pepperoni,” or “Uhhhhh, I’ll have the cold cuts on white bread,” isn’t going to foster any kind of future creativity from ne’er-do-well truants, if you ask me.

The Hash House closed down. So did the Try Me Restaurant, where I ate fried chicken back in the summers of my college days while working as a garbage truck driver. I backtracked down the 72 bypass to Montague Avenue, then took a left toward town. Little

Pigs Barbecue had changed hands, but it’s still open. An indoor contraption has replaced the outside smoker, but at least pre-pattied, frozen barbecue’s not being shuttled in via one of those wholesale food suppliers.

“Wha’chew need, honey?” the woman asked as I stood beneath the ORDER HERE sign.

Oh, man, I had some flashbacks. My buddy Brother Scott now goes by his given name, Jesse, and is a history professor. Fellow part-time truant Paul Borick’s in charge of building projects at Wake Forest University, after a stint as an architect. I have no real clue as to my other old friends’ whereabouts—Charlie, Jeff, Brillo—who piled into the Opel, though I could see them all, elbows on the table, barbecue sauce draining from wrists to elbows.

I didn’t tell this new woman anything about plot and character, that I needed some new ideas, that I might be sitting at a table a little longer than the rest of the patrons—who looked about the same as when I snuck in here back before the world fell apart. 🍷

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*George Singleton's latest collection of stories is Stray Decorum, due out in September. He's published two novels and four other collections.*





## EATING SALMON CROQUETTES WITH WILLIAM FAULKNER

*A visit to Rowan Oak  
inspires supper*

by John T Edge

I LIVE WITHIN SIX BLOCKS OF ROWAN OAK, William Faulkner's home here in Oxford, Mississippi. He was, arguably, America's greatest twentieth century writer. And his primitive-style Greek Revival house has been restored with such care that you sense the man just ducked out back in search of a pack of smokes and a drink of whiskey. Yet I rarely swing open the door.

Recently, with an out-of-town journalist in tow, I took the tour from Rowan Oak curator Bill Griffith. At the close of our circuit, we paused in the tiny kitchen at the back of the house. There, Griffith played to his audience, reeling off tales of Faulkner and food.

He told us of a Faulkner family cook who refused to clean and cook the doves that the great man shot. She knew, in her heart of hearts, that doves bear departed souls to heaven. We talked about Faulkner's use of food imagery, too, including that passage from *Flags in the Dust*, in which he wrote so evocatively about the smell of fried catfish filtered through a screen door: "FRESH CATFISH TODAY, the board stated in letters of liquified chalk, and through the screen doors beyond it came a smell of refrigerated food—cheese and pickle and such—with a faint overtone of fried grease."

Griffith told us that salmon croquettes were one of Faulkner's favorite dishes. He said that the recipe Faulkner favored was easy to come by. "It's on the can. You can still find the stuff in the grocery store. I think the brand is called 'Pink Salmon.' Something like that."

The next day, I headed to the grocery store, to an aisle I don't often visit. The cans were stashed down low. Sardines in soybean oil. Smoked oysters in vegetable oil. Sockeye salmon. Red salmon. And yes, pink salmon. There was no single can that came blazoned with a recipe, but I did find one with a label that looked like a holdover from Faulkner's era.

That night, in Martha Foose's cookbook *Screen Doors and Sweet Tea*, I found a recipe that recalled Mississippi in the 1950s, when Faulkner was in his salmon croquette-eating prime. I've adapted it a bit, filtering it through memories of my own mother's salmon croquettes, skillet-fried two states over in 1970s Georgia.

### SALMON CROQUETTES

- 1 16-ounce can pink salmon, drained, picked clean of stray bones and skin
- 2 large eggs
- 1 teaspoon lemon pepper
- 1 scant teaspoon garlic salt
- 2 tablespoons minced onion
- 1 teaspoon dill pickle relish
- 10–12 saltine crackers, crumbled
- 1 tablespoon all-purpose flour
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil

In a medium bowl, combine all but the flour and vegetable oil. Shape into 6 to 8 cakes about ½ inch thick. Refrigerate for an hour.

Heat a large skillet to medium-high. Sprinkle the croquettes with flour. Add the oil and cook the croquettes for 6 to 8 minutes, or until brown, turning them halfway through.

Drain on paper towels and serve with stone-ground grits and braised mustard greens. 🍷

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*John T Edge directs the SFA.*

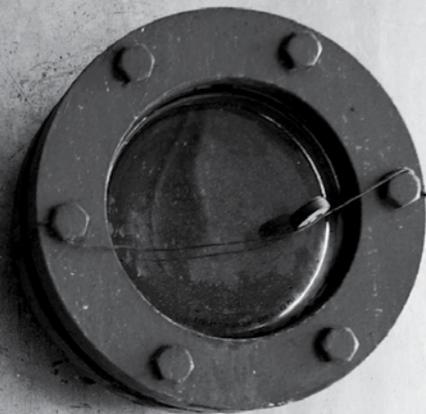
*A different version of this piece appeared in Gourmet.*

IMAGE: A Love Note For My Bay Beauty Down Apalachicola Way (detail) by Amy Evans Streeter. Acrylic on wood, 2007.

# IMMIGRATION AND DISTILLATION

## A Review of *Spirits of Just Men*

by Katie Walsh



# SPIRITS

WHAT DO MODERN MIGRANT FARMWORKERS in the South and Depression-era moonshiners in the Appalachian Mountains have in common?

Read *Spirits of Just Men*, Charles D. Thompson Jr.'s tale of the plight and might of mountaineer whiskey makers, and their struggles appear comparable.

Thompson has spent much of his life advocating for farmers and farmworkers. In *Just Men*, he traces his own roots back to Franklin County, Virginia, once known as the "Moonshine Capital of the World."

Illustrated with photographs of mountain farms, families working their liquor stills, and portraits of the author's own grandparents, the story Thompson tells is both personal and political. The intricacies of illegal liquor production raise questions about strong-armed federal policies, the institutional manipulation of poor and vulnerable populations, and the will to fight for survival even at the cost of the law.

"No one is proud that their family members broke the law of course, but those who have searched for answers know that the reasons people made liquor are more complex and nuanced than many first realize," he writes.

Thompson describes how Prohibition created a robust black market for bootleg whiskey. What's more, he exposes the Federal government's "eradication" strategy of going after the little guys rather than addressing the poverty and neglect that drove moonshining entrepreneurs in the first place. Thompson explains that moonshine is a value-added product. A gallon of moon brought more revenue to a struggling farm than a bushel of unprocessed corn.

It seems all too similar to modern anti-immigration law. Today's legislation has created an incredible market for cheap labor. It employs tactics like deportation, targeted detention and arrest, denied citizenry, and border fences. And all this without offering solutions for the issues that bring immigrants here to begin with.

G-men and liquor bosses in Franklin County built an enormous racketeering scheme in which they controlled the sale of mountain moon and collected regular bribes to "protect" its makers. Of the vast monies that poured in from illicit whiskey, next to nothing went to the moonshiners themselves.

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*One can't help but think of the undocumented worker, leaving his farm back home to work the land of another.*

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“They were caught between needing to make money and needing to keep quiet about it,” writes Thompson. “This put them in a predicament of perfect vulnerability into which the unscrupulous could enter and take advantage. And they did.”

Thompson shows the human side of the stereotypical lawless, backwoods moonshiner. He breathes life into the hard-pressed men fighting to keep their farms and feed their families.

One can't help but think of the undocumented worker, leaving his farm back home to work the land of another and eke out a living for his loved ones. *Just Men* invokes these present-day struggles as much as its historical ones. In between its pages' rich depiction of illicit whiskey in the “wettest section in the USA,” the thought arises: As we debate how best to regard and treat the immigrant population in the United States, we could learn a lot from the lives and times of mountain moonshiners. 🍷

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*Katie Walsh is a Texas-based freelance writer and editor with a passion for food and all things cultural.*

*PHOTO, PAGE 11: Buffalo Trace Distillery, Frankfort, Kentucky. Photograph by Kate Medley.*

## **LOOK FOR CORNBREAD NATION 6**

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# **WATER INTO PORT**

*Eugene Walter taught me how to drink*

*by Jack Pendarvis*

I GREW UP IN THE COUNTRY, on a bad curve. It wasn't unusual to wake up at night to the sound of a car crash. Somebody had taken the curve too fast and sailed into the ditch. Dad would get up and go out to see if he could help. He has stories about it he still won't tell me.

This was the Gulf Coast of Alabama. There was nothing around. A few other houses. And, for some reason, a restaurant, just on the other side of the curve. I don't remember ever walking to it. We would get in the car and drive a couple yards away to go to the El-Bo. That was the name of the restaurant: the El-Bo.

It's still there, but now it's called the Lighthouse. I was there last year and had a great soft-shell crab po-boy. So if you're ever near Bayou La Batre, which you won't be, check it out. The Wednesday night special is fish and grits; has been for decades.

Back when it was still the El-Bo, I was eating lunch there one day with my grandparents. These were my big-city grandparents—my mom's parents. They lived in Mobile. They were down for a visit. And my grandfather did something astonishing. He ordered a glass of beer to go with his gumbo. A glass of beer! This shocked me, and I burst into tears right there at the table.

I was thirty-four years old.

No, I was probably eight, and definitely Southern Baptist. On Easter Sunday we did have communion, but it was Welch's grape juice and saltine crackers.

I was secretly excited by the thought that Catholics drank wine in church. It seemed fancy. And as I got older, I was a skeptical Sunday-school student. They would tell us that yes, Jesus drank wine, and Paul told Timothy, "Take a little wine for thy stomach," but that was a different kind of wine. They had a long explanation, something about how wine wasn't really fermented in Bible days. It was really just grape juice, old grape juice. But I would ask, "If it wasn't fermented, then why does the Bible say 'Be not drunk with wine'?" They had an answer for that, and also an answer for why we have hair on our arms, which was what tempted me to believe in evolution.

My natural skepticism didn't have any real-world applications. When my grandfather ordered that glass of beer, it was obvious he was a secret drunkard. Now this was a tiny glass as I remember it, like a Holiday Inn gives you for orange juice. But he was certainly a

backslider...or *was he saved at all?* "By their fruits ye shall know them."

As the years flowed on, my sanctimony only became more sanctimonious. I preached a mini-sermon to my eleventh-grade girlfriend when she wanted to sneak some champagne after a school event. I later heard she had made out with a guy who had a mustache. Oh, Tammy!

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*I really liked port. Port was what sent me over the line from nondrinker to drinker. Looking back, it must have been pretty cheap port.*



When I got to college, I magically became more liberal, maybe because I met a French girl who had a dead lover and underarm hair, smoked cigars, and listened to Oingo Boingo. I also met Eugene Walter—food writer, cook, novelist, poet; collaborated with Fellini and Zeffirelli...on and on. He came to speak to my English class and I decided to interview him, because I was also taking a course in journalism. He seemed like he'd be more fun than my original subject, teen suicide.

Here's some useless trivia: I went to college with Jimmy Buffet's mother. She was a lot older than me. She had re-enrolled to take fiction-writing classes, I think. She knew Eugene, and since I was going to his house for dinner, I asked her advice. She said I should bring a bottle of Bolla Soave. This was the first time I had heard of bringing a bottle of something to somebody's house. I didn't have any idea what Bolla Soave was. I'm pretty sure I didn't know there were different kinds of wine, aside from red and white, which I had heard about in a Billy Joel song.

I declined to have wine with dinner during my first meeting with Eugene, though he did convince me to try peppermint schnapps beforehand and a glass of port after dinner. I really liked port. Port was what sent me over the line from nondrinker to drinker. Looking back, it must have been pretty cheap port. Eugene didn't have a lot of money.

But as I got to know him, and went over to his house fairly regularly, he taught me this civilized thing of having an aperitif and a digestif...or several. The more I had, the more civilized I became. Anisette was my favorite, aside from port. Basically, I enjoyed anything that tasted like candy. In fact, we once had floats made of vanilla ice cream and sloe gin for dessert. Mostly sloe gin. When times were especially hard, Eugene would pull out this bottom-shelf stuff called “apple bourbon.” (He knew my background, and never got tired of telling me that a Baptist preacher had invented bourbon.)

I remember him serving Kirschwasser once. While we were sipping it, he said, “You can taste the stems.”

And I realized that wow, yes, along with the cherries there was a sharper green flavor, like, I don’t know, *sticks and leaves*. For the first time, I really stopped to taste the complexity of something.

And when I left I probably had to drive around the corner as usual and take a nap in my 1974 Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme, waking up hours later with my face sticking to the white vinyl. 🍷

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*Jack Pendarvis has written three books. His columns appear in The Believer and The Oxford American.*



**IF YOU'RE READING THIS IN A RESTAURANT OR STORE,**  
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and you're not yet an SFA member, please join at [www.southernfoodways.org](http://www.southernfoodways.org).

**IF YOU ARE AN SFA MEMBER,**  
well, thank you.



*Expect crab stew, whole hog barbecue,  
and yellow cabbage collards.*

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**THE MISSION** of the Southern Foodways Alliance is to document, study, and celebrate the diverse food cultures of the changing American South.

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