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# Gravy



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QUARTERLY

FROM THE SOUTHERN  
FOODWAYS ALLIANCE



PUBLICATION OF GRAVY IS UNDERWRITTEN BY MOUNTAIN VALLEY SPRING WATER

# Gravy

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## ABOUT GRAVY

A publication of the Southern Foodways Alliance, a member-supported institute of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi. Visit [www.southernfoodways.org](http://www.southernfoodways.org).

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**PUBLICATION OF GRAVY** is underwritten by Mountain Valley Spring Water.

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

WE HAVE A HEALTHY SWEET TOOTH HERE AT THE SFA. Our oral history archives are studded with tales of banana pudding, caramel cake, and sweet potato pie. We even have a whole project dedicated to the New Orleans sno-ball. As a lover of all things built on a base of sugar, butter, or cream, I decided it was time for a sweets-themed issue of *Gravy*. In these pages, our contributors bring you stories, images, and recipes from the old-school (lemon chess pie) to the *nueva sur* (Mexican-style paletas).

You'll notice that this issue of *Gravy* is a bit fatter than usual (no, it wasn't the sugar) and a lot more colorful. We hope you enjoy the new format. When you're finished reading, please visit the SFA's blog for a link to a very sweet Spotify playlist inspired by this issue.

—Sara Camp Arnold





## CHANNELING AUNT RUTH

*How I became a Southern baker*

*by Karen Barker*

I GREW UP in the Flatbush neighborhood of Brooklyn, where there was a very strong corner-bakery culture but little actual home baking. People tended to purchase their breads and desserts rather than produce them out of cramped urban kitchens. I was lucky that my maternal grandmother, an exception to this rule, lived upstairs. She was a Russian immigrant who barely spoke English, had no written recipes, and never used standardized measures. Bubby Fanny turned out an amazing array of Eastern European specialties and taught me that homemade sweets were a tribute to one's family and always included the ingredients of time and love.

When Ben, my North Carolina-born husband, brought me south after culinary school, I was a stranger in a strange land. Eventually, I transitioned from bagels to biscuits, from cheesecake to chess pie, and discovered that what I always thought was cornbread was actually corn cake. I married into a family of legendary bakers. To me, the young professional baker, the Barker family prowess set the bar stratospherically high, and the expectations associated with my training only amplified my intimidation.

My husband's people were originally tobacco-growing subsistence farmers from the Union Ridge community of northern Alamance County, in the North Carolina Piedmont. The women of the household produced three meals every day, passing on cooking skills and knowledge to their daughters. Ben's grandmother Louise and her sister Ruth became known throughout the area for their fine hand with breads and sweets. Working a cast-iron, wood-fired oven with no thermostat or controls, in a kitchen without electricity or plumbing, they honed an extensive repertoire.

My father-in-law recalls that "they baked every day; they made biscuits every day; and that can lead to darn good biscuits—every day." Ruth was a talented farm cook who gloriously made do with ingredients that were on hand. My husband swears that his chubby conformation as a child was due in large part to his summers on the farm, with unlimited molasses-and-butter-slathered biscuits and a never-ending parade of pies.

When Louise moved off the farm and into town, her style became a bit more modernized and refined. Cake baking was a highly competitive sport among homemakers, with each woman having a particular specialty. Louise was considered an all-around champion, but her pound cakes garnered the greatest admiration. She was detailed and exacting and made sure that her daughter-in-law—Ben's mom, Jeanette—was able to recreate family recipes to her standards.

Feeling the pressure, I quickly tried to perfect my crust skills when I moved to North Carolina. I learned that a smile and a well-crafted pastry go a long way in conquering any social situation. After bringing a couple of blueberry-blackberry pies to my first Barker family reunion, I was deemed "all right." When persnickety Gran Louise told me I had "the gift" for baking, I felt as though it was I who

had received the greatest gift—to pass muster with her was no small feat. (Little did she know that my only domestic talent was in the culinary arena.)

Jeanette, Louise, and Ruth were my role models for rich pound cakes, delicate cheese straws, and billowy lemon meringues. I'm a tinkerer, but I never messed with my baking angels' recipes: They were simple, exceptional, and lovingly passed down. Their time-tested methods, explanations, and memories associated with each recipe were as valuable as the recipes themselves. I learned that fresh, hand-grated coconut was the secret to Gran's famous holiday coconut cake; and how Aunt Ruth's impeccably fried pies depended on apples that were home grown, picked, and dried, encased by a flaky lard dough. It was impressed upon me that the family's definitive cornbread recipe relies not only on full-throttle buttermilk, farm eggs, and fresh stoneground meal, but a well-seasoned skillet and a generous amount of bacon grease.

The next generation is in training. My niece Lee has spent the last two Christmas Day mornings at Jeanette's elbow, learning how to replicate her biscuits. My son Gabriel has shown a strong interest in scratch baking, and my granddaughter Kayla has recently asked me to show her how to make bread pudding. I have come to believe that in fact you are what you eat, in that a family's history resides in those passed-down recipes.

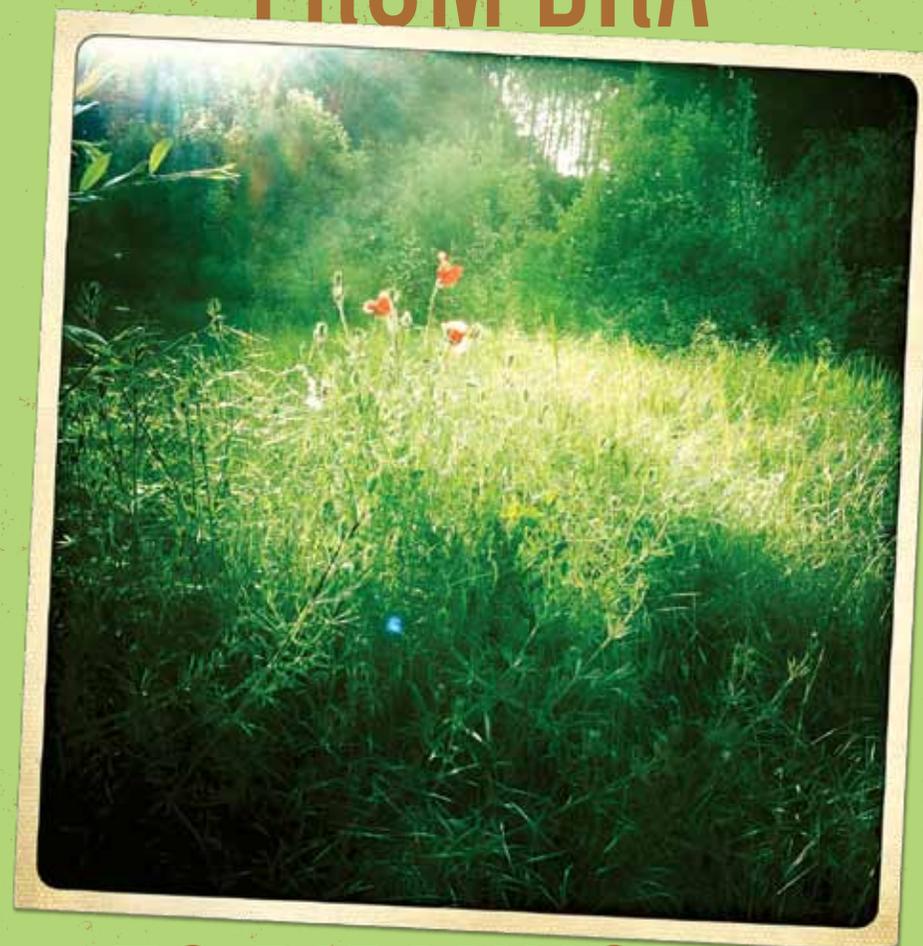
My Bubby had little in common with Ben's kinfolk other than the nurturing secret of home baking and how important it is to create a set of food memories for your family. It is not lost on me that the phrase "give me a little sugar" means "show me some love" in the Southern lexicon. Remarkably, I can hear my grandmother saying the same thing in Yiddish: *gib mir a bissel tsuker*. Perhaps, at their hearts, Flatbush and Union Ridge aren't so different after all. 🍷

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*Karen Barker was happily co-proprietor and pastry chef of the Magnolia Grill in Durham, NC (1986–2012). Now, happily, not.*

IMAGE, PAGE 2: Gladys Always Put a Rabbit's Foot in Her Apron Pocket When She Made a Meringue, *acrylic on wood (2010)*, by Amy C. Evans.

# FROM BRA



# TO BIRMINGHAM

*On honeysuckle and going home*

*by Marie Stitt*



IT'S THAT TRANSITIONAL TIME, here in northern Italy, when spring turns summer and flowers open in silent explosions. Lately, on evening runs, I've been thrown off pace by the pollen-thick air. I run through farmland, alongside chestnut trees and poplars, past a small hazelnut grove, a few slopes of vines, an acre of green wheat, a field of violet, and a patch of golden wildflowers.

The wisteria hits me first. A month ago, it was purple and it smelled like a cold glass of Grapico. Now there's a white variety sprawling throughout the trees. When your heart rate is up and you breathe deeply, everything smells more intense. But last weekend, I ran through a wisteria-heavy air pocket and smelled something else—the rich, skull-filling scent of honeysuckle.

I scanned the brush until I found a small patch of flowers. I stepped over some low bushes to reach the blossoms and pulled a few from the branches. I pinched the bottom of a flower and sucked the nectar from the stamen. Honeysuckles aren't really a food, they're more like Christmas lights of fragrance strung up in the green boughs—little olfactory firecrackers.

The smell of those flowers took me back to when I was six years old, living in Alabama. We lived close to the public golf course, and the fence was always draped with honeysuckles in the summer. What makes these flowers intriguing isn't just their taste-smell—direct, sweet, floral—it also has to do with quantity. I'm no economist, but I think the limited supply—one single, sugary drop pulled from a flower, placed on the tongue—somehow increases demand.

We'd gather as many honeysuckles as we could and try to fill a whole mason jar with the flowery juice. We'd spend what seemed like hours extracting the droplets from each flower into the jar. I remember the heft of the glass, the ridged script on the sides of the jar, the sound of metal scraping as I screwed on the band and ring of the top, the holes in the lid—the same jar did double duty for catching lightning bugs. The most nectar we ever collected was probably a tablespoon.



Years later, I returned to Alabama and reunited with my childhood friend Charlie. Charlie has the most smiling eyes you've ever seen. And—fear of stereotypes be damned—he's a farmer who wears plaid, has a beard, makes banjos, and sits on his front porch and plays them. One afternoon he invited a few friends over for biscuits and honeysuckle sorbet. He'd gathered armfuls of blossoms and let them steep in a big pot of sugar and water. He made a honeysuckle syrup, and from that made the sorbet. We sat

on the porch, as the biscuits went black in the oven, eating icy flowers. Charlie brought out moonshine in a mason jar. We sat there together, the summer smell of Alabama all around us, green and humid, box fan blowing, eating sorbet out of mugs and passing around the moonshine, another kind of magic unable to be contained in a jar.

Italian gelato bests our ice cream, and porchetta rivals our whole-hog barbecue, but they are merely temporary diversions. The memories I'll always carry with me are the ones that transport me home. 🍷

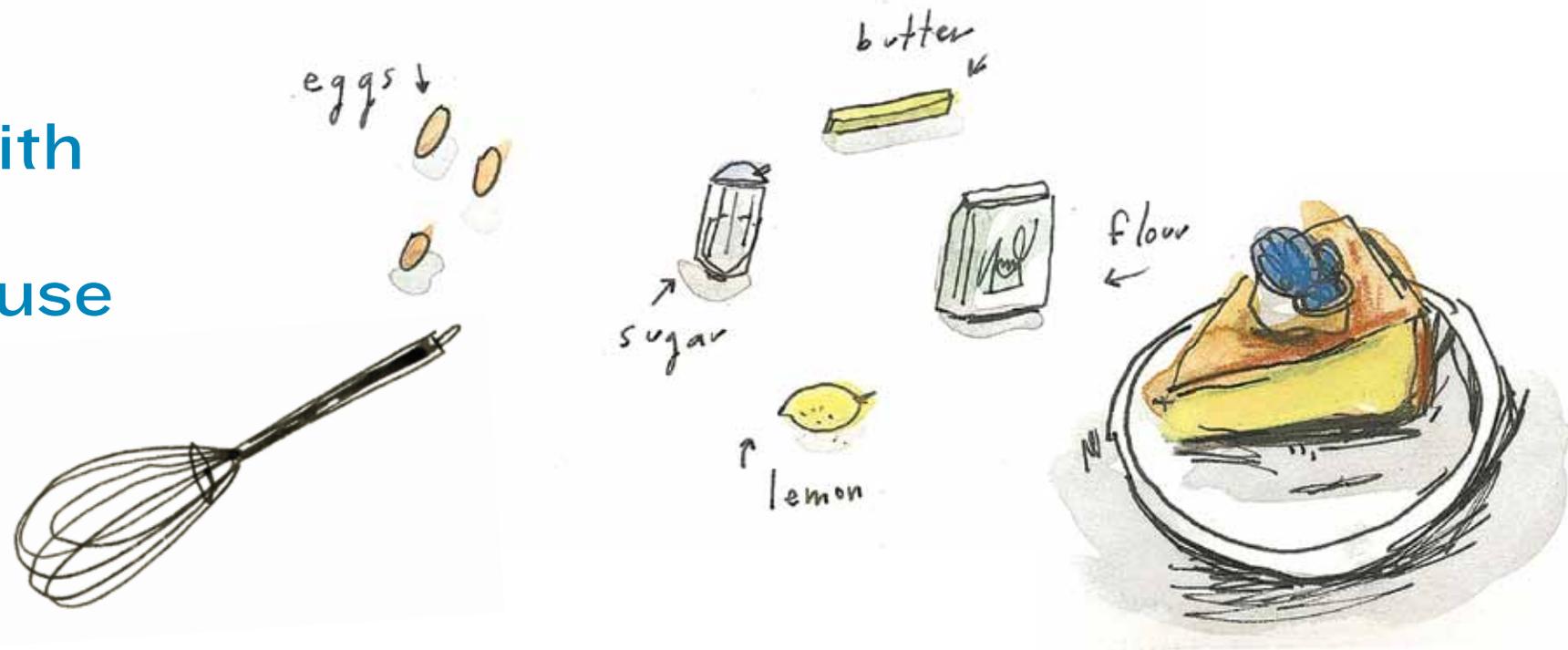
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*Marie Stitt grew up in various Alabama and South Carolina kitchens before hightailing it to California to stomp grapes. She has recently returned to the South after completing a master's program in Gastronomy in Bra, Italy.*  
PHOTOS by Marie Stitt.

# Baking with Nothing in the House

## Lemon chess pie

by Emily Hilliard



I STARTED BAKING PIES the summer after college. My friends and I had discovered a wealth of berry trees and bushes near the house we shared in Ann Arbor, and we'd go out on frequent picking missions. We collected so many berries that we started baking pies together in the evenings. When I moved away after that summer, my friend Margaret suggested that we start a blog to keep in touch through the pies we baked, and "Nothing-in-the-House" was born.

Nothing-in-the-house pies, also called "desperation pies," were popular during the Great Depression in the South and beyond. These pies were made from a few inexpensive ingredients, and included vinegar pie, cracker pie, and green-tomato pie. Thus the name of my blog is a nod to history, thrift, and practicality, in solidarity with other home bakers, past and present.

Chess pie is one of those true nothing-in-the-house pies, made with cheap, readily available ingredients. Though there are many speculative stories on the origins of the name for this humble dessert, the one that most historians agree upon is that it is an alteration of "cheese pie," a common British tea or after-dinner tart that, curiously, did not actually contain cheese.

The name was probably linked to the pie and other non-cheese puddings because the lemon curd-like filling simulated the texture of soft cheese. In fact, "lemon cheese" was a colloquial term for lemon curd. As Karen Hess notes in her annotated edition of Mary Randolph's *The Virginia Housewife* (1824), cheese was often spelled with only one "e," hence the misreading and subsequent evolution to "chess." Though *The Virginia Housewife* includes neither a cheese nor chess pie recipe, Randolph's transparent pudding is essentially the same as S.R. Dutt's "chess pie," which appeared in her 1928 book *Southern Cooking* and was the first recipe to bear the name. As is true in most of today's chess pie varieties, the main ingredients for the filling are butter, sugar, and eggs.

This pie is adapted from the recipe for Kentucky lemon chess Pie in the *New York Times Heritage Cookbook*, edited by Jean Hewitt. It's just a tad fancier than a straight chess pie, but is still quite simple. The cornmeal adds a little substance to the filling, and the lemon zest and juice make it taste almost like the lemon bars of my Midwestern upbringing. Once baked, the top of the pie should form a crust, with an oozy, lemony filling underneath.

## Nothing in the House Lemon Chess Pie

Makes 1, 9-inch pie

### INGREDIENTS

Your favorite pie crust recipe for a 1-crust pie, unbaked  
½ c. (1 stick) butter at room temperature  
1 ¼ c. sugar  
1 Tbsp. yellow corn meal  
3 eggs  
Grated zest of 1 lemon  
Juice of 1 lemon  
1 tsp. vanilla extract  
¼ tsp. salt



### DIRECTIONS

1. Prepare the pie crust per your preferred recipe, or use the Nothing in the House crust recipe (found online). Chill dough at least 1 hour before rolling out and fitting into a greased and floured 9-inch pie pan. Preheat the oven to 325 degrees F. Put the rolled and fitted crust back in the fridge while you prepare the filling.
2. Cream together the butter and sugar in a mixing bowl, using a wooden spoon or a stand mixer. Then beat in the cornmeal.
3. Add the eggs, one at a time, beating well after each addition. Mix in the lemon zest, lemon juice, vanilla, and salt until well combined. Pour the filling into the pie shell and bake for 45–60 minutes, or until the top of the filling forms a crust and a knife inserted into the middle comes out clean. Serve with berries and whipped cream. 🍷

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*Emily Hilliard writes the blog [www.nothinginthehouse.com](http://www.nothinginthehouse.com). Elizabeth Graeber is an illustrator whose work can be found at [www.elizabethgraeber.com](http://www.elizabethgraeber.com). Together, they created the book *PIE: A Hand Drawn Almanac*.*

ILLUSTRATIONS by Elizabeth Graeber.

# TE QUIERO, LA MICHOACANA

*Mexican paletas find a following in Memphis*



by Mark Camarigg

EVERY MORNING, twenty-five-year-old Rafael Gonzalez delivers coolers laden with homemade ice cream and *paletas*, or popsicles, to his three Memphis-area La Michoacana ice cream shops. His recipe is simple: fresh fruit, fresh cream, and sugar. Horchata (a blend of rice milk and cinnamon) and pine nut are the most popular flavors, along with avocado, strawberry, and vanilla. Gonzalez sources dulce de leche from his father's ice cream shop in Chihuahua, Mexico. And he imports ice cream making equipment from the tiny village of Tocumbo, in the state of Michoacan.

Ice cream making is a Gonzalez family tradition. Says Rafael, "My father is sixty-five, and he started selling paletas when he was fifteen in Tocumbo. I started when I was seven years old, and my dad taught me how to make them. He gave me my recipes, and I'll show them to my kids."

The history of paletas is tangled in a seventy-year-old ice cream making tradition that originated in Tocumbo. In the 1940s, cousins Agustín Andrade and Ignacio Alcázar left behind field work in

their native Michoacan and began opening *paleterías* (shops selling popsicles and ice cream) in Mexico City. Alcázar soon discovered he could make more money financing the *paleterías* of others than running them himself. He began lending money to Tocumbo natives who wanted to open ice cream stores. Decades later, an estimated 15,000 La Michoacana *paleterías* dot Mexico.

La Michoacana is not a corporation or franchise, but a very loose network of independent businesses with no central marketing, accounting, or advertising. La Michoacana ice cream is not a registered brand in Mexico. Anyone with an ice-cream maker and a storefront is free to use it. The *paletería* supply company in Tocumbo makes money selling equipment, ingredients, and marketing advice to entrepreneurs.

La Michoacana stores hit the United States around 1990. Proprietors like Gonzalez have adopted the La Michoacana name to gain name recognition with Mexican customers. “If you go to Mexico, there are more La Michoacanas than there are McDonald’s,” he says. “I get a lot of people from St. Louis and Little Rock. They say, ‘When I was a kid, my dad would send me to the ice cream store, and now I can come here.’”

Gonzalez’s first Memphis location, on busy Winchester Road, initially catered to a Mexican clientele. Now, Gonzalez says, “I’m surprised by the response we get at our other stores. It’s probably seventy percent American and thirty percent Mexican patrons.”

Buoyed by success, Gonzalez will open a fourth Memphis-area location and a new store in Nashville in 2013. More operators are getting in to the business, but Rodriguez is convinced he offers something that the start-up *paleterías* can’t touch.

“I won’t change from what I’m doing here. If I change, it won’t be La Michoacana.” The other guys, he says, will never be able to recreate the flavor of the La Michoacana recipes. Nor can they top the magic of the La Michoacana name. 🍷

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*Mark Camarigg is the publications manager for Living Blues magazine at the Center for the Study of Southern Culture.*

# AN ORAL HISTORY CAKEWALK

*The sweetest stories behind the food*

*from the SFA oral history archives*

WE’VE BEEN COLLECTING the stories behind Southern food for a decade now. Our archive is filled with interviews about boudin and barbecue, catfish and kibbeh. It’s about time we offered you something for dessert. Here are a handful of sugary oral histories to satisfy your sweet tooth. You can always meet more bakers, confectioners, and sno-ball slingers at [southernfoodways.org](http://southernfoodways.org).





## EVA PERRY

*Tee Eva's Pralines and Pies, New Orleans, Louisiana*

*"Oh, I'm a sno-ball eater. I will eat the sno-ball with condensed milk, and the chocolate ice cream, with vanilla ice cream, with evaporated milk. I crumble up a fresh-cooked praline and mix it into my sno-ball, and then I'll put the praline flavor over it. It's awesome." —"Tee Eva" Perry*

EVA PERRY established Tee Eva's Pralines & Pies in 1989, when she was fifty-five years old. Watching chef Paul Prudhomme blacken redfish on television, she realized that she, too, had a culinary talent to market.

Eva learned her trade from a long line of country cooks. While she grew up in New Orleans, both sides of her family were bayou Creoles. Some of her best memories are of her aunt's lemon icebox pie and bread pudding; of making pralines with just-gathered pecans and brown sugar straight from the mill; and of the frozen treats she purchased for a penny from a Greek-owned store in her neighborhood. Eventually, she graduated to sno-balls.

In 2003 Eva passed Tee Eva's Pralines & Pies down to her granddaughter, Keonna Thornton Sykes. Eva hasn't retired, though. She still shaves ice and works the late shift at the shop.



## DEXTER WEAVER

*Weaver D's Delicious Fine Foods, Athens, Georgia*

*"Through the years we have improved the sweet potatoes, you know, adding different things. I add orange flavoring now along with the lemon and vanilla and nutmeg." —Dexter Weaver*

BORN IN ATHENS, GEORGIA, in 1954, Dexter Weaver grew up in Baltimore, Maryland, where he tended the garden at his family home and later catered from his mother's kitchen. When Dexter moved back to Athens in the early 1980s, he brought his culinary talents and entrepreneurial spirit with him, cooking for events and selling dinners from his home on the weekends. In 1986 he opened Weaver D's Delicious Fine Foods. The meat-and-three café quickly gained a reputation for its soul food, as well as for the unique personality of its owner.

Dexter Weaver has a way with words, and his trademark saying, "automatic for the people," pushed him into the limelight when the Athens-based band R.E.M. used the phrase as the title for their 1992 album. His sweet potato soufflé, while not technically a dessert, is so rich and sugary it might as well be.





## JOY PERRINE

*Jack's Lounge, Louisville, Kentucky*

*"There are the purists who say that bourbon should only be drunk straight or with a little splash of water; it shouldn't be in a cocktail. But there are a whole lot of people who just don't like the way bourbon tastes the first time they taste it, and these are the people I try to reach." —Joy Perrine*

JOY PERRINE COMES FROM a long line of bootleggers. In 1965 she moved to the Virgin Islands, where she got a job behind a bar and started experimenting. It was there that Joy learned about a local tradition of making guava-berry rum infusions, a technique she brought with her when she moved to Kentucky in 1978. Once in Louisville, Joy started making bourbon infusions, as well as innovative cocktails. Eventually, Joy began mixing drinks, first at Equus Restaurant, then next door at Jack's Lounge. Joy gets her menu ideas from cookbooks, encounters with new ingredients, and her own memories of a place or a time. 🍷

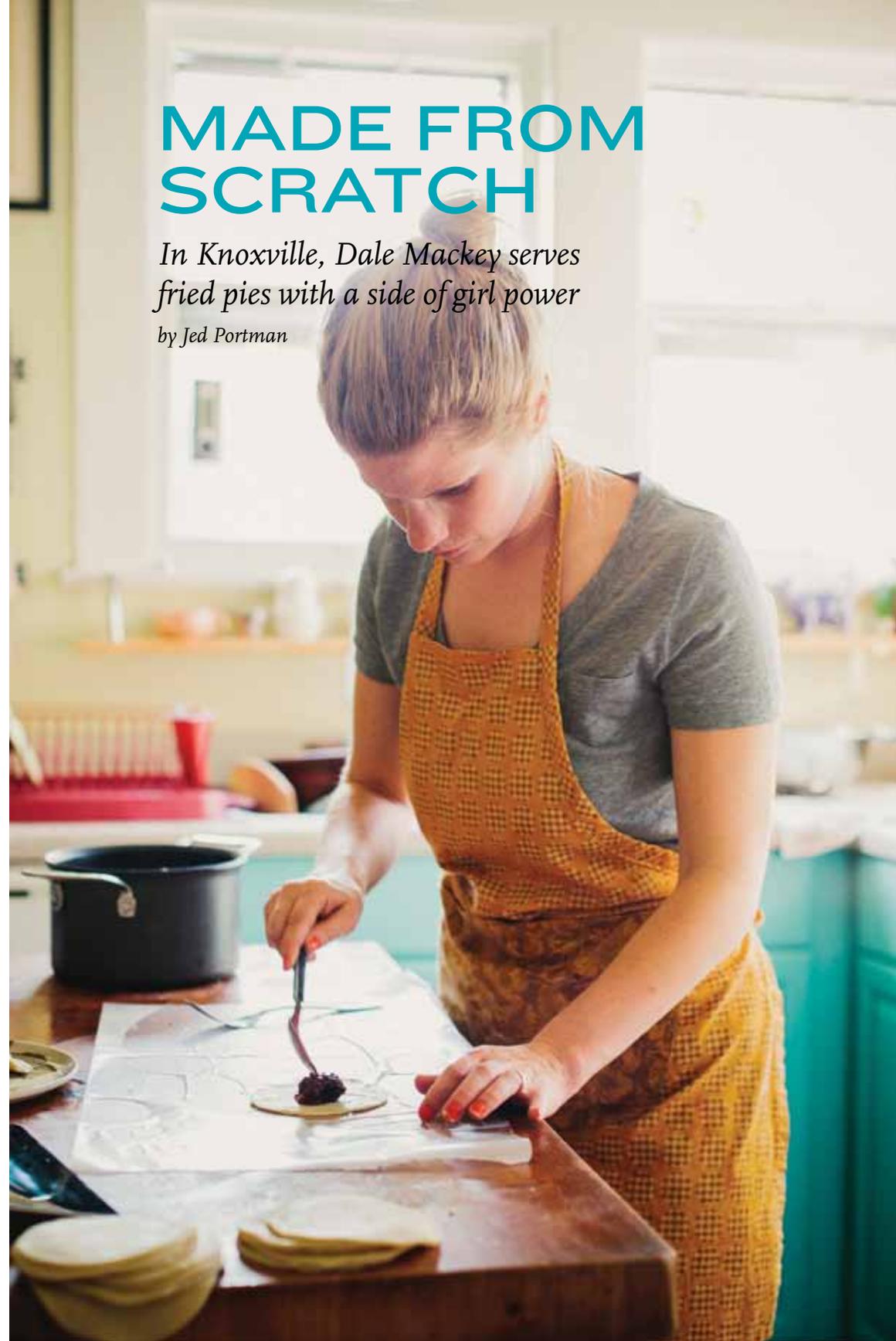
PHOTOS, PAGE 13–14 by Sara Roahen.

PHOTOS, PAGE 15–16 by Amy C. Evans.

## MADE FROM SCRATCH

*In Knoxville, Dale Mackey serves fried pies with a side of girl power*

*by Jed Portman*



DALE MACKEY LIKES TO HELP OTHER PEOPLE. She has worked for non-profits all of her adult life, first in eastern Kentucky and now in Knoxville, Tennessee, where she serves as the outreach coordinator for a public-access television station. When she founded Dale's Fried Pies in the summer of 2012, she incorporated community service into the business model.

A lifelong cook whose knack for do-it-yourself crafts is well documented on her blog, Mackey had begun serving fried pies to friends and family at get-togethers several years before.

"I was drawn to fried pies because you can put anything in them," she says. "People around here know what a fried pie is. A lot of people have really good memories of them. But within them, I can get funky."

She began to think seriously about selling fried pies in the wake of her wedding last spring. After months of planning and crafting, Mackey had free time on her hands. Restless, she blogged about her idea for a fried-pie truck, adding a 'Donate' button on a lark. "I don't know what I was thinking," she says. "But my friends saw the button and started donating." Within a week or two, she had five hundred dollars. "I thought, 'Well, I can't waste my friends' money.'"

She invested the money, which was not quite enough for a food truck, into the raw materials for a fried-pie stand, modeled after an old-fashioned wooden lemonade stand. After clearing a series of bureaucratic hurdles, Mackey attracted a following at Knoxville's Market Square Farmers' Market last fall. Traditionalists took to flavors like apple and cherry. The more adventurous came for fried pockets of spicy chipotle macaroni and cheese, green-chile chicken, and curried sweet potato.

While most new small-business owners cling tightly to their dollars, Mackey set out to spread the wealth. So she founded the Awesome Girl Squad, which plans to induct three Knoxville-area girls between the ages of eight and twenty every year. Each Awesome Girl receives a day of fried-pie revenue to pursue a creative or community-based project. "It's money that you might have been able to get together yourself, but might not have," she says. "It's someone saying, 'I think this is a good idea, and here's the money to do it.'"

"The Awesome Girl Squad is something that, when I get worn down by making a million pies, or worn down by all the bureaucracy

involved in selling food, I look to as one unquestionably great thing," says Mackey. The first two Awesome Girls are using their money to record a folk album and to put on a community health fair. A third will be inducted this spring.

When Mackey isn't thinking about other people, she tends to her own growing business and makes plans for the future. She just purchased a trailer in which she'll fry her pies on-site at markets and special events, and she is now renovating it for the upcoming busy season.

Dale's Fried Pies is, for the moment, a nights-and-weekends operation. Mackey works at the television station four days a week, which doesn't allow her enough time in the pie stand to make a living—or to satisfy her growing customer base. With a boss who supports her part-time vocation, no one is forcing her hand. But the pies have her heart. "At some point," she says, "I am going to have to take a leap of faith." 🥧

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*Jed Portman writes and edits for the Charleston, South Carolina-based magazine Garden & Gun.*

PHOTOS by Shawn Poynter.





Jason Thompson of Olive & Sinclair chocolate company in Nashville, Tennessee, wears his love for the Southern Foodways Alliance on his sleeve. Photo by John T. Edge.

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well, thank you.

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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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