Southern Foodways Alliance

#41

THE SFA SERVES YOU

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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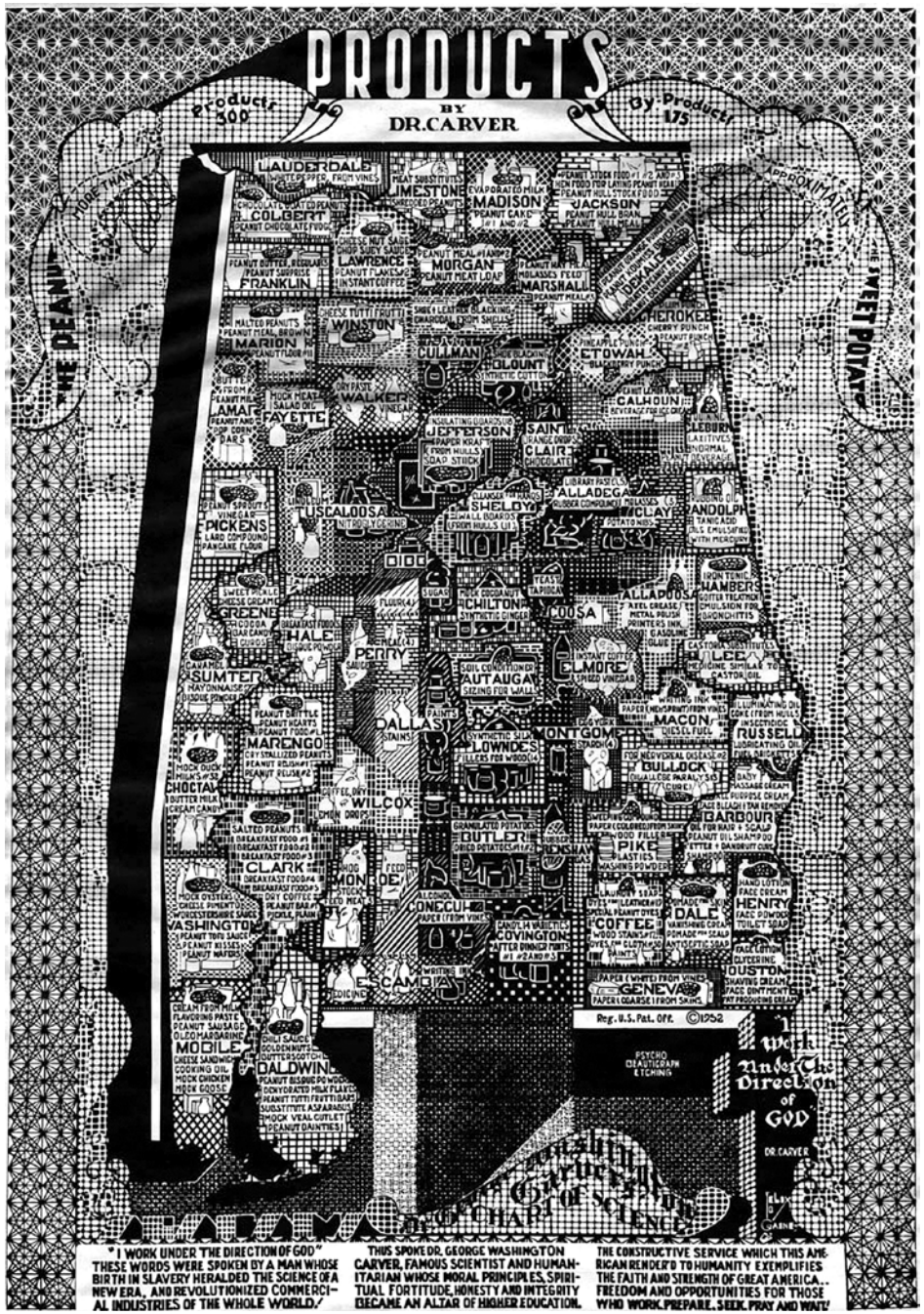
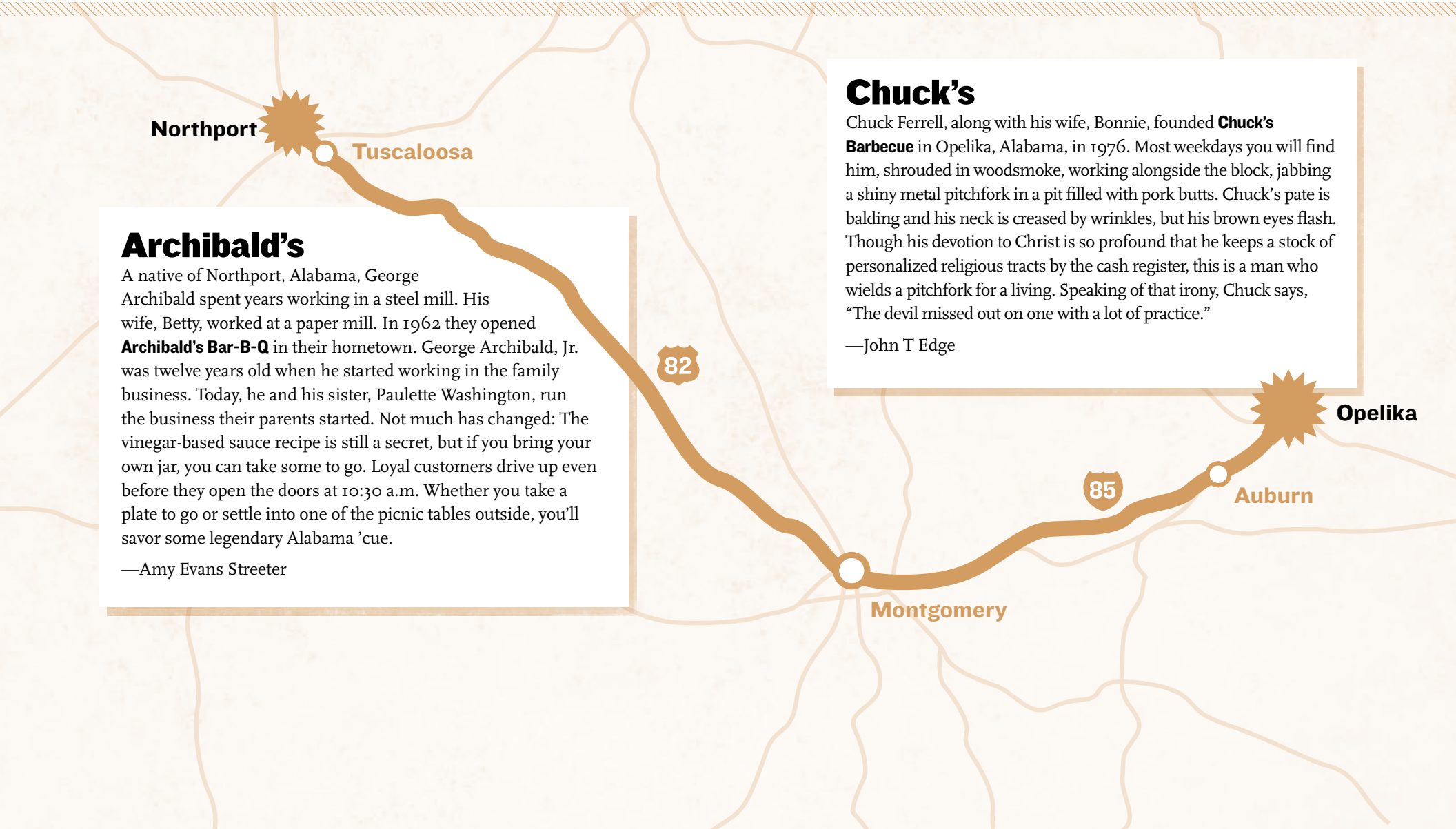


This map illustrates a sampling of the hundreds of plant-based products that George Washington Carver developed during his tenure at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. But as Mark Hersey explains on page 14 of this issue, Carver's legacy as a conservationist is just as important as that of creative chemist or "Peanut Man," as generations of schoolchildren know him. Image courtesy of Bob Coyle and Steve Saari.

PIGSKIN & PORK

A ROAD TRIP

THE LAST TWO BCS NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIPS were won by teams from the Yellowhammer State. That makes Alabama a pretty good place to be come football season. Whether your battle cry is "War Eagle" or "Roll Tide," the SFA's Southern Barbecue Trail has you covered for tailgating fare just a pigskin's throw from the 'Bama and Auburn campuses.



Archibald's

A native of Northport, Alabama, George Archibald spent years working in a steel mill. His wife, Betty, worked at a paper mill. In 1962 they opened **Archibald's Bar-B-Q** in their hometown. George Archibald, Jr. was twelve years old when he started working in the family business. Today, he and his sister, Paulette Washington, run the business their parents started. Not much has changed: The vinegar-based sauce recipe is still a secret, but if you bring your own jar, you can take some to go. Loyal customers drive up even before they open the doors at 10:30 a.m. Whether you take a plate to go or settle into one of the picnic tables outside, you'll savor some legendary Alabama 'cue.

—Amy Evans Streeter

Chuck's

Chuck Ferrell, along with his wife, Bonnie, founded **Chuck's Barbecue** in Opelika, Alabama, in 1976. Most weekdays you will find him, shrouded in woodsmoke, working alongside the block, jabbing a shiny metal pitchfork in a pit filled with pork butts. Chuck's pate is balding and his neck is creased by wrinkles, but his brown eyes flash. Though his devotion to Christ is so profound that he keeps a stock of personalized religious tracts by the cash register, this is a man who wields a pitchfork for a living. Speaking of that irony, Chuck says, "The devil missed out on one with a lot of practice."

—John T Edge

HAVE YOU BEEN SERVED?

Notes on *Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens* and *The Help*

by Audrey Petty

"The kitchen was often a contested space shared by white employer and black cook, one in which the lines of dependence, while constantly imbalanced, cut in many directions." San Augustine, Texas. Photograph by John Vachon, 1943. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

OWNED BY QUAKER OATS FOODS since 1926, Aunt Jemima received her most recent corporate makeover in 1989. Slimmed-down, younger, and relieved of her bandana, she now sports a sleek hairdo and pearl earrings. As always, she flashes a warm, inviting smile.

Aunt Jemima made her debut at the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893, played by Nancy Green. A cook and former slave, Green recited plantation stories and gave pancake-cooking demonstrations for the crowds. But in the public imagination, Aunt Jemima needed no introduction, because her image had circulated for a century or more.

Mammy is dead. Mammy endures. And Mammy never was.

A FUNDAMENTAL ACHIEVEMENT of Rebecca Sharpless's *Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens: Domestic Workers in the South, 1865–1960* (UNC Press, 2010) is how forthrightly it confronts centuries-old mythology about female African-American domestic workers, particularly those who served as cooks. Sharpless explains, "Cooks were made, not born, contrary to white southern stereotype.... A woman or a girl sometimes decided for herself to cook rather than do field work or other types of domestic labor; at other times, her family made the choice for her."

Tapping letters, autobiographies, and Depression-era Federal Writers' Project interviews, the author privileges the subjectivity of black women and crafts a historical narrative that is at once intimate and sweeping in its scope. Sharpless illustrates clearly that cooks were a vulnerable, exploited workforce, underpaid and subject to "crazily shifting hours" and unregulated expectations. Many domestic workers pinned hopes for improved workplace conditions on union representation or New Deal legislation. Sharpless illustrates one example:

> In 1938, Roxanna Hupes of Galveston, Texas, wrote to President Roosevelt, feeling as many of her peers did that the president was likely to read her entreaties and make needed changes in American society. Detailing her workday, which began at 6:30 in the morning with a mile's walk to her place of employment, Hupes efficiently summarized the situation for most domestic workers in the American South: "The wages that we get, so small and the hours is so long."

Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens focuses on the black women who cooked and the families they supported, both white and black. The study reveals how domestic workers toiled to carve out a life beyond work. From Emancipation to federal desegregation, Sharpless describes the impacts of various advances on the lives and livelihoods of African-American cooks. Beginning in the early 1930s, canned soups and other ready-made goods became available at supermarkets, transforming the routines of many cooks. Likewise, the trend among domestic workers (starting at the turn of the twentieth century) to "live out" rather than under the roof of their employers created a significant demarcation between on-call and what little private time domestic employees were able to claim in their own homes.

Sharpless creates an engrossing story, making palpable the human dynamics at play in many of these work arrangements. The kitchen was often a contested space for white employer and black cook, one in which the lines of dependence, while constantly imbalanced, cut in many directions.

With the support of diaries, merchant ledgers, and cookbooks, Sharpless introduces the reader to a range of dishes that reveal countless decisions made and techniques employed by black cooks. She cites the African influence on American cooking in such foods as black-eyed peas, okra, peanuts, and millet. "But cooks in the most well-to-do households learned other gradations as well....Whether by choice or necessity, many cooks expanded their repertoires far beyond their ancestral roots." Success in work, such as it was, required adaptability, Sharpless argues. To remain in the good graces of an employer required navigating tools and technologies, personalities, schedules, and boundaries.

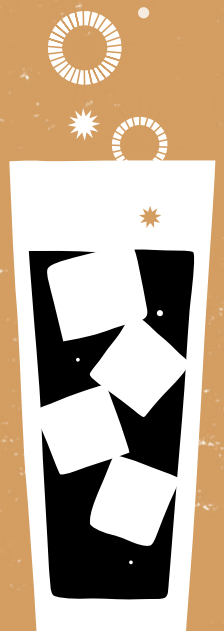
COOKING IN OTHER WOMEN'S KITCHENS arrived on the heels of the remarkable commercial success of Kathryn Stockett's *The Help*. Stockett's book debuted in early 2009, rose to the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list, and has been adapted for the screen, with a Hollywood feature film that will be playing by the time you read these words. Set in Jackson, Mississippi, in the early 1960s, the novel is narrated by three female characters: Aibileen Clark and Minny Jackson, both African-American domestic workers, and Eugenia "Skeeter" Phelan, a white daughter of the Old South with a budding sense of professional ambition and social justice. Over time, old friends Aibileen and Minny make common cause with Skeeter to advance their stories of domestic work—anonymously—in an anthology that Skeeter plans to edit and send to a New York publishing house.

The Help concerns itself with telling the untold story of African-American domestic workers. As Skeeter remarks to an inquiring Northerner (who happens to be a book editor), "Everyone knows how we white people feel, the glorified Mammy figure who dedicates her whole life to a white family. Margaret Mitchell covered that. But no one ever asked Mammy how she felt about it." This is, arguably, the hook of *The Help*—the premise that generated its stupendous buzz. But Stockett's work falls short, remixing Mammy—merely making her over—instead of retiring her. Rather than serving up something fresh and substantive, the best it can offer is reheated leftovers.

While Aibileen and Minny are distinct in temperament and background, they are both, at the core, clichés. Aibileen is the older, sexually neutered, devoted helpmate who has raised over a dozen white children. And Minny is the sassy, misbehaving *sister-girlfriend,* whose supreme talents as a cook have kept her regularly employed, despite her impertinence. The novel's characterizations of some of its white characters, such as Hilly, the book's racist socialite-villain, are rather flat as well.

As a novel about race relations in the Jim Crow South, *The Help* risks very little. Some may find it unfair to compare a novel to a work of history, but there are essential truths about historical eras that can be found in the most inspired works of fiction (Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* is a prime example). Unlike *Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens*, *The Help* embraces the assumption that "Mammy," a mythic grande dame of the antebellum South, existed, and proceeds to imbue her with a soul. Rebecca Sharpless truly gives us the inside story.

Audrey Petty is an associate professor of English at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She's at work on an oral history of Chicago public housing communities for McSweeney's Voice of Witness *series.*



THE VANDERBILT FUGITIVE
A CLASSIC COCKTAIL, REMIXED

by Bobby Heugel

THE VANDERBILT FUGITIVES were a 1920s band of Southern poets. Meticulous writers, most of them also appreciated a great drink. At Anvil Bar & Refuge in Houston, we believe in the narrative power of a great menu. Our Summer of the South menu approaches each cocktail-character as an advocate for Southern traditions and ingredients—few of which are more iconic than buttermilk.

Buttermilk may sound like an odd cocktail element, but dairy and acidity are common themes in a number of classics. It just took a little imagination to recognize that this nectar of the South was meant to be mixed. When we introduced buttermilk to the milk punch—a staple throughout New Orleans and other parts of the South—the Vanderbilt Fugitive was born.

Through their poetry and literary criticism, the original Vanderbilt Fugitives—Robert Penn Warren, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and others—challenged the nation's opinion of Southern intellectualism. Likewise, at Anvil, we believe that the South's extensive tippling traditions can be stirred and shaken to create one hell of a modern cocktail.

THE VANDERBUILT FUGITIVE
by Yao Lu & Anvil colleagues

1¾ oz El Dorado 5 Year Demerara Rum
1 oz rich, acidic buttermilk
½ oz Yellow Chartreuse
½ oz Averna Amaro
½ oz maple syrup

Combine all ingredients with ice and shake for at least two to three minutes, allowing cocktail to expand in volume. Strain into a Collins glass with cubed ice. Garnish with freshly grated nutmeg.

Bobby Heugel is a bartender and co-owner of Anvil Bar & Refuge in Houston, Texas.

ABOVE: Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren enjoy a drink on Warren's patio in Fairfield, Connecticut, 1979. They would have liked Anvil's Vanderbilt Fugitive. Photograph by William Ferris, William R. Ferris Collection, Southern Folklife Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

A LAND OF OPPORTUNITY

The Bright Star, Bessemer, Alabama

As told to Amy Evans Streeter by Jimmy Koikos, March 11, 2004

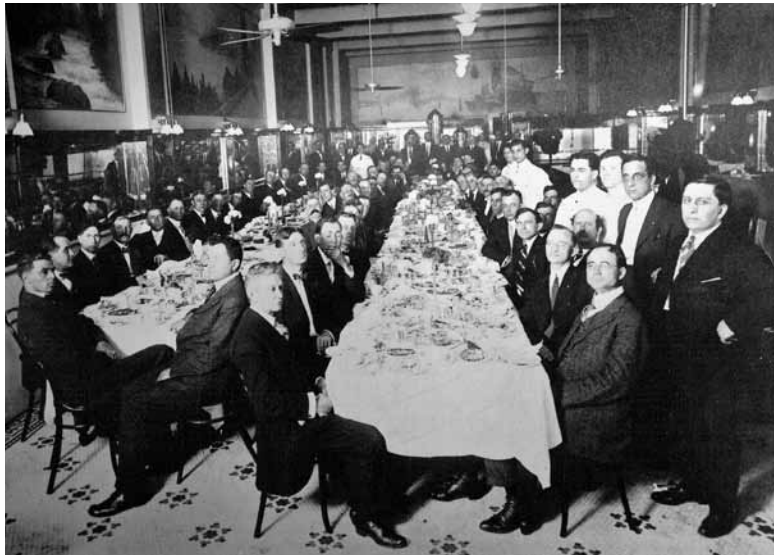
Opened by Greek immigrant Tom Bonduris in 1907, The Bright Star is Alabama's oldest restaurant. It has been in its current location in the steel town of Bessemer, just outside of Birmingham, since 1915. Bill and Pete Koikos, great-nephews of Tom Bonduris, took over the restaurant in the 1920s. Bill's sons, Jimmy and Nick Koikos, still work the floors and the kitchen, serving an encyclopedic menu that owes debts to both Greece and the American South. The interior of the restaurant is true to its 1915 glory, with hand-painted wall murals, a marble-tiled floor, and private, curtained booths.

I'M JIMMY KOIKOS, owner of The Bright Star restaurant. My daddy came in 1920 to The Bright Star [and worked] until he passed away in 1988 at the age of ninety-four. He had a brother that had come to New York earlier. And so, we don't know exactly why, but he (my uncle) came to Birmingham. And he (my father) came off Ellis Island, and he got here and walked through these doors and started working as a young immigrant to learn the language, to send his mother everything he made.

There were Greek immigrants in the late 1800s, early 1900s, coming to America for a better opportunity. A lot of people followed him from the same town. Most of the Greek immigrants were in Birmingham, which is, you know, thirteen, fifteen miles from here. Mr. Bonduris was a very smart man. He couldn't get educated, but he was smart and was a good businessman. And he said, "This restaurant is a Bright Star"—with a vision of nothing but a land of opportunity. We've had the same neon sign there since 1941.

These murals, above the booths, have been up there since 1915. They were painted by a European artist. He painted that first one with a guy fishing, and he painted it in Brighton, Alabama, which is just up the street. He was kind of like a wino, but he had talent. So he painted that thing, and Mr. Bonduris liked it, so he painted all European things. And then he painted these murals one by one. Put them up. Then they fed him and wined him and—he just wandered on through. He never dreamed they'd be up here ninety years later.

IN THE EARLY 1910S, soup was a nickel, and it included a drink. And, you know, ten or fifteen cents for hamburgers and chili. The town of Bessemer was booming. The Bright Star, when it first opened up here in 1915, used to be open close to twenty-four hours a day. It was just people coming from mining towns—coffee, doughnuts, chili.



It became a seafood restaurant and a steak restaurant in the 1930s. That's when they started getting fresh snapper. And it's still a specialty today called "Bright Star's Snapper Greek-Style." Fresh snapper, broiled with a little oregano, olive oil, lemon juice.

We have snapper throats, which is the throats of the snapper, and we fry it, serve it with vegetables. It's got bones. It's different. It's a delicacy. People just love it. We cut all our fish, all our steaks. We get fresh fish from Panama City Beach, Florida. We get them two to three times a week. He'll deliver about 1,500 pounds in a morning.

All our pole beans, we shell them. The squash is fresh. The cream potatoes—the potatoes are not instant. And, you know, that's what we believe in.

One of the most popular steaks in the Birmingham area is Bright Star's Tenderloin of Beef Greek-Style. We split it and put a little olive oil, a little Worcestershire sauce, and we marinate it. That's one steak I recommend everybody eat.

We make all our pies here. We've got two pastry people who do nothing but make our pies. And we make them every day. We've got a lemon icebox—we serve a lot of them to go. Then you've got the peanut butter pie, the pineapple cream cheese pie, and coconut pie.

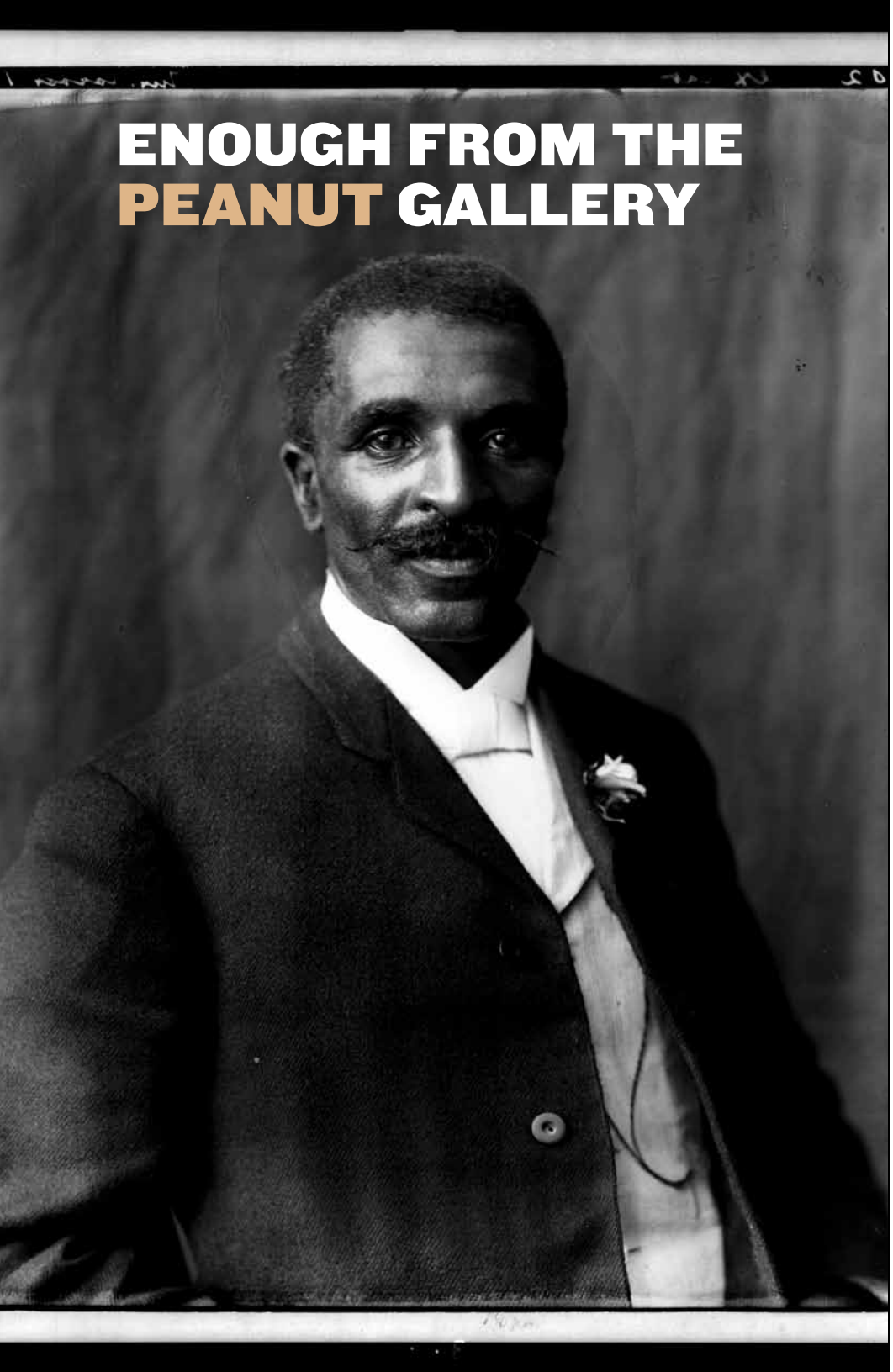
We went through the Depression, and the good times. Now, I think, we're fighting chain outfits. There's a new restaurant on every corner. But there's a lot of respect for the Bright Star.

ONE TIME [Alben] Barkley came in here—he was vice president under Harry Truman. They had a Bessemer corn and livestock festival. And he came probably in the late '40s. Of course, George Wallace has been in here. Oh, Senator [Richard] Shelby comes in here, of course. Coach Bear Bryant ate here a lot. In fact, we got his booth back there. We would love to get a President of the United States here, but, you know—of course that remains to be seen.

We went through the Depression, and the good times. Now, I think, we're fighting chain outfits. There's a new restaurant on every corner. But there's a lot of respect for The Bright Star. We've had to fight location. We're off the beaten path. People have to come down here to us. We're in a city that was booming that is not exactly booming anymore. When Bessemer was going down, we just decided to stay out here.

But we still average about 5,000 people a week. Eighty-two employees. Seven days a week. We've got some great people. We've got one woman who has been here for thirty-five years, and one twenty-seven years. One seventeen years. Our chef's been here twelve years. The success of the restaurant is to have people like that.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: Former Bright Star owner Bill Koikos with waitresses in the 1940s. LEFT: A banquet at The Bright Star ca. 1915. Photographs courtesy of Stacey Craig, The Bright Star restaurant.



ENOUGH FROM THE PEANUT GALLERY

SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT ON GEORGE WASHINGTON CARVER

As told to Sara Camp Arnold by Mark Hersey

Mark Hersey is a professor of history at Mississippi State University and the author of My Work Is That of Conservation: An Environmental Biography of George Washington Carver (*University of Georgia Press, 2011*). Gravy *asked Hersey why he argues that Carver should be remembered as a conservationist and what lessons his work offers for the cultivated South of the twenty-first century.*

THE MYTHOLOGY OF THE PEANUT MAN obscured more about Carver than it revealed. It was rooted in what was, in the 1920s, a rather shocking juxtaposition between Carver's race and his abilities as a scientist. Because such an unusual figure could be exploited by various groups representing divergent ends (from the United Daughters of the Confederacy to the NAACP, and from impoverished black tenants to their landlords and merchants), Carver's reputation was stretched in multiple directions until his real accomplishments were lost in a swirl of accolades and tributes. My book argues that there's more to Carver than the myth, and that his conservation work makes him particularly relevant today—the more so as issues related to agriculture are at the center of the national consciousness for the first time in a century. Carver, of course, was hardly alone as an emissary of agricultural conservation, but few of his peers anticipated so clearly the concerns of modern environmentalist critics of production-driven agriculture. I would argue that Carver offers a salient reminder that inhabited areas are no less crucial to matters of conservation than wilderness, and that redressing environmental exploitation requires accounting for social and economic exploitation.

Dr. Carver was known for wearing a fresh flower on his lapel. Photograph by Frances Benjamin Johnston, 1906. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

TRUE GRITS

Pendarvis on Portis

by Jack Pendarvis

GOOD FICTION MAKES YOU HUNGRY. If you can read *Mildred Pierce* by James M. Cain without craving a plate of chicken, you have no soul. But the king of the culinary allusion—and yes, I'm counting Proust—is the great comic novelist Charles Portis of Arkansas.

The most familiar foodstuffs in the work of Portis are those poor corn dodgers victimized for drunken target practice in *True Grit*, though I hear that the editors of *Gravy* prefer this foodways-friendly passage from *Gringos*:

> He held up a floppy tortilla and said that corn didn't have enough gluten in it to make a dough that would rise. Still, heavy or not, the flat bread was good, and yet nobody seemed to know it outside Latin America and the southern United States. Corn, potatoes, tomatoes, yams, chocolate, vanilla—all these wonderful things the Indians had given us. Whereas we Europeans had been over here for 500 years and had yet to domesticate a single food plant from wild stock.

My wife's favorite Portis quotation is from *The Dog of the South*, and coincidentally fits right in: "When she's eating chocolate cake late at night, does she also drink sweet milk from a quart bottle till it runs from the corners of her mouth?"

But for me, the pinnacle comes when the title character of *Norwood* chunks a sausage patty at his annoying brother-in-law through an open bathroom door. The ensuing slapstick concludes with this handy rule-of-thumb: "I don't think you could put anybody's eye out with a sausage."

Jack Pendarvis of Oxford, Mississippi, is a columnist for The Oxford American *and* The Believer.

IF YOU'RE READING THIS IN A RESTAURANT OR STORE,
it's yours for the taking.

IF YOU'RE READING THIS AT HOME,
and you're not yet an SFA member, please join at www.southernfoodways.org.

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

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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