



#45

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Gravy



**A FOOD
LETTER**

**FROM THE SOUTHERN
FOODWAYS ALLIANCE**



PUBLICATION OF GRAVY IS UNDERWRITTEN BY MOUNTAIN VALLEY SPRING WATER

Gravy

DOCUMENT • STUDY • CELEBRATE

ABOUT GRAVY

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Editor:

Sara Camp Arnold
gravy.sfa@gmail.com

Designer:

Devin Cox
devincox@gmail.com

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In Memoriam: Furman Bisher
Wright Thompson

PHOTO, OPPOSITE PAGE by
Amy C. Evans, from the 2009
SFA Field Trip.

EDITOR'S NOTE

JUST IN TIME FOR FOOTBALL SEASON, this issue of *Gravy* was masterminded by Wright Thompson. A native of Clarksdale, Mississippi, who now makes his home in Oxford, Wright has covered every sport from cricket to bullfighting for ESPN.com and ESPN The Magazine. He's eaten pizza with Les Miles, explored Augusta during Masters week with James Brown's daughter, and embedded with a competition barbecue team that won third place at the Memphis in May World Championship. For his turn as *Gravy's* first-ever guest editor, Wright pulled together a hungry crew of boys to talk about the games they play, and the food and drinks that fuel their exploits.

Because I reached my athletic peak as a high-school tennis player, and because Richard Ford's *The Sportswriter* is as close as I come to reading the sports page, I ceded most of the editorial control to Wright. And—I can't resist a topical pun—he knocked it out of the park. I didn't get to assign a feature on the impossibly adorable (and Southern!) Olympic gymnast Gabby Douglas, but I think it all worked out for the best. Thanks, Wright.

—Sara Camp Arnold



IMPOSSIBLE FANTASIES

Sports and cooking,
viewed from the armchair

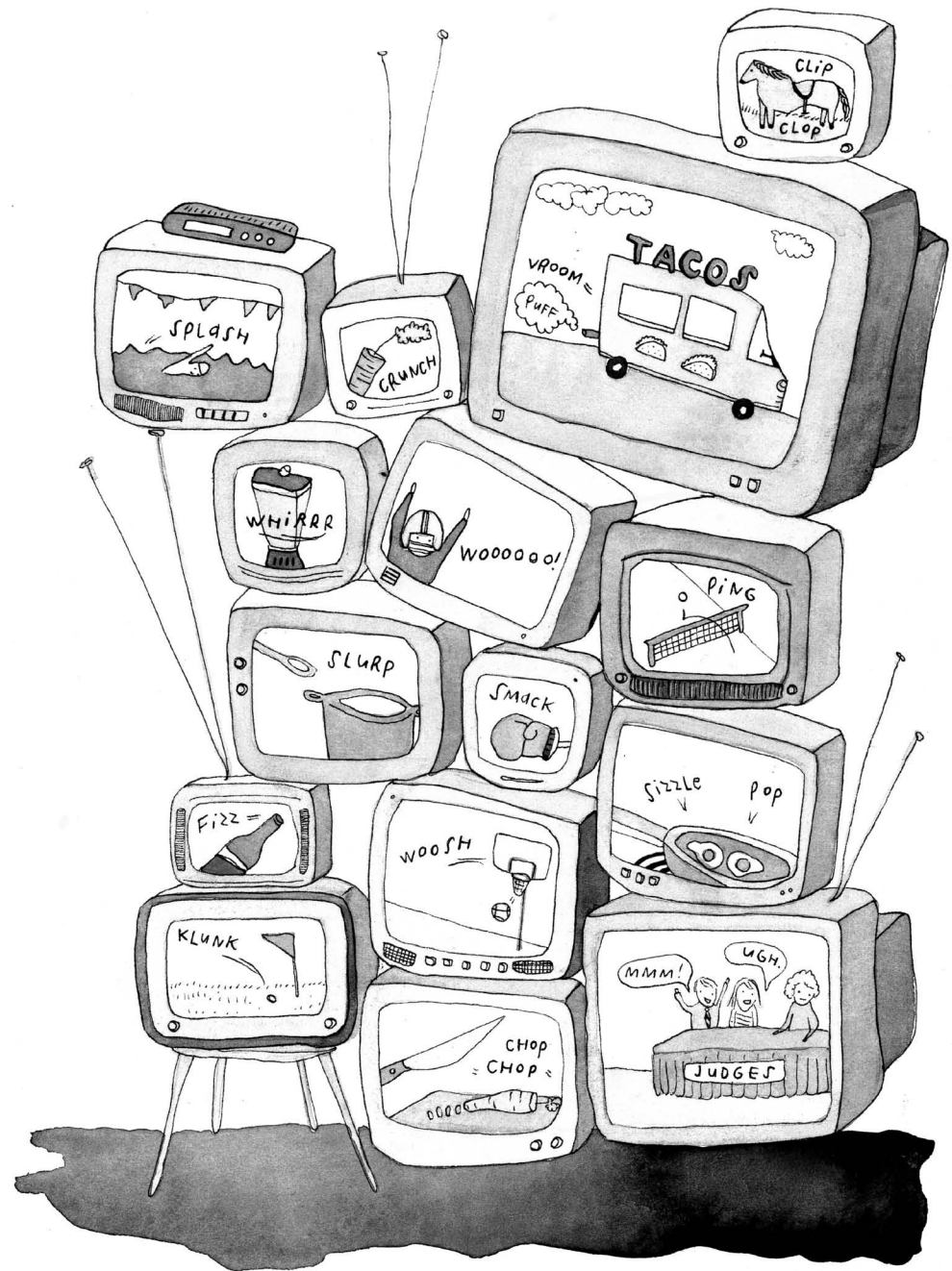
by Chris Jones

MY TV VIEWING HABITS consist almost entirely of two distinct genres: live sports and competitive food shows. Sure, there are surface similarities—there is usually some sort of manufactured pressure, some ticking clock; there are moments of genius and beauty but also calamitous failure; there is often vicious duplicity set against a backdrop of underlying brotherhood; and for some reason, at least on TV, most of the growling, tattooed participants in both football games and cook-offs are total assholes. (I don't believe all of you are assholes. Just most of you.) But the truth is, on some deeper level, I watch them for totally, totally different reasons.

I've played sports. I understand sports and their mechanics. I've talked to hundreds of athletes, and I like to think that I know what they're thinking and how they do what they do. I watch sports because watching sports makes me feel competent. It is a world in which I somehow feel as though I belong.

And that makes no sense. That particularly rarefied universe couldn't be farther removed from me. When I was younger, I subscribed to the usual male fantasy that if only I'd practiced more, if only my dad had pushed me a little harder, I could have been a professional athlete. After years of writing about sports, now I know: I never had a chance of being one of those guys. They are fundamentally different machines. And yet there I sit, nodding.

Cooks and cooking represent the opposite intellectual experience. I once lived in an apartment with two other guys for nearly



three years, and I made exactly one meal. Apart from the plate of slimy pasta I made on my first night there, I ate every single meal out. I am baffled by even the most basic act of applying heat to food. (Would that be toasting? Boiling? I have no idea.)

Just this morning, I waddled down to the hotel buffet and marveled at the waffle iron; I couldn't have been more impressed by an alien spacecraft. I took the prescribed cup of yellow goo—a completely inedible substance, as far as I can tell—and put it in this machine, and out came a fluffy, delicious waffle. I have no explanation for how that happened. I don't know what goes into waffle batter, and I don't know why making it hot transforms it into something so good. No joke, I have a better chance of explaining the physics of black holes than the alchemy of waffles.

And you, you assholes who can make waffles and all sorts of other tasty things out of oil and flocks of dead birds and maybe some kind of root vegetable? You are strange and glorious wizards.

You might think I'm making fun of you at this point, but I'm being completely sincere. When I watch sports, I sit back and revel in my understanding, in my perceived (and wrong-headed) closeness to the participants. When I watch food shows, I sit there mystified and salivating, like a dog that doesn't understand how his bowl keeps getting magically filled. And even though I have a far, far greater chance of becoming a decent cook than I do of becoming even a remotely passable athlete—every house has a kitchen, including mine for some reason—I am wedded to the illusion that hitting a home run makes perfect sense, and turning an octopus into something not only edible but amazing is the product of an elusive witchcraft.

We all need our impossible fantasies.

I watch you because I will never be you. 🍷

Chris Jones is a writer for Esquire and the winner of two National Magazine Awards.

ILLUSTRATION, PAGE 3 by Emily Wallace.



BARBECUE GOES GLOBAL

SEOUL FOOD IN ATLANTA

by Andy Staples



Barbecue gets pigeonholed as a regional cuisine enjoyed by people with provincial tastes, and that stereotype endures because it is partially true. Every time I mention a joint on my Twitter feed, I get responses from people in other states claiming that beef/pork/mutton isn't real barbecue and that mustard-/vinegar-/ketchup-based sauce is an unacceptable dressing for said meat.

I understand why. Before I began covering college football and basketball for *Sports Illustrated*, I was intolerant of other barbecue cultures. I was a pulled pork/mustard-based die-hard. Then my job took me to Austin for brisket. It took me to Raleigh, where I had whole hog chopped and covered in vinegar-based sauce. It took me to a tiny house in Northport, Alabama, called Archibald's, where they serve the best ribs on the planet. My intolerance was wrong. It's all barbecue. The only rule is that the meat must be smoked.* After that, all bets are off. If someone happens to grow up in another culture and then introduces elements of that culture's cuisine into the barbecue canon, it isn't cause for xenophobia. It is cause for celebration.

So give thanks that Jiyeon Lee didn't continue her career as a pop star in her native Korea. Be grateful that Lee studied at Le Cordon Bleu and met partner Cody Taylor while working in the kitchen of Atlanta's since-shuttered Repast. This confluence of events has made it possible for diners to walk into Heirloom Market and order the spicy Korean pulled pork sandwich.

A pulled pork sandwich with slaw is standard issue in Georgia. A pulled pork sandwich that incorporates *gochujang* (a spicy Korean pepper paste) and kimchi slaw is not. The mash-up marries the best of Korean and Southern barbecue, and it adds several layers of intrigue to a staple that occasionally needs a kick. The Korean influences don't stop at the sandwich, though.

I visited Heirloom Market in March while in Atlanta to cover the second weekend of the NCAA basketball tournament. The locals who pointed me toward the place raved about the brisket, but when I arrived for a 1 P.M. lunch, all the brisket was gone. I considered this a good sign. The ribs, soaked in a *gochujang* marinade before smoking, didn't need any of the three sauces (tomato-based, vinegar-based, spicy Korean) on offer. Still, they paired well with any member of the trio. The Korean fried sweet potato with black sesame seeds was a welcome

change from the baked beans-and-slaw side doldrums, and the mac and cheese is Lee and Taylor's winning riff on a classic.

Parking is an adventure at this former liquor store: a barbecue badge of honor. On my visit, the owner of the next-door convenience store helped guide me to a spot so I wouldn't hog one reserved for his customers. Lines can be long, and seating space is limited. None of this matters. The food is worth the trouble.

Asian cuisine blends well with barbecue because many of the main ingredients are complementary. Heirloom Market isn't the first to fuse the flavors, but it's notable because it merges them so well. There are, of course, lots of other global barbecue inspirations out there. The Brazilian *churrasco* tradition and the Argentine/Uruguayan *asado* celebrate South America's way with beef, from flank steak to sweetbreads. In South Africa, a *braai* centers around *boerewors*, the nation's favorite sausage. Shish kebabs, *kofte* (meatballs), and chicken are popular at the Turkish *mangal*. So America's finest food group is truly a culinary citizen of the world. Chefs from Baltimore to Birmingham, bring it on. Because not all of us who love barbecue crave only the stuff smoked in our hometown pits. 🍷

Andy Staples is a senior writer for SI.com. He also runs a food blog, "Heaven is a Buffet."

PHOTO, PAGE 5 by Dustin Moody.

** This is not to be confused with the grammar rules about the word barbecue, which are extremely rigid and important. Barbecue is not a verb. It's a noun, and it isn't a synonym for grill, no matter what Merriam and Webster say. It mostly describes slow-smoked meat, but it can describe an event if smoked meat is the main course. If you attend an event in someone's backyard and the host hands you a hamburger or a hot dog, you are not at a barbecue. You are at a cookout.*

LAST CALL AT THE PILLOW SLED BAR

Maximum guts, minimum glory

by Spencer Hall



I. Suburban Bobsled: 1985–1986

Matching beverage: Cherry Coke. Flavor profile: diabetes and Jolly Rancher. Notes of lab-engineered fruit.

THE SPORT'S ORIGINS came from my sister's habit of sliding down the stairs on her ass. She would start at the top of the stairs, and then ratchet down, gaining momentum toward the end and then slamming home against the baseboards at the bottom on landing. Children have no nerves in their bodies, and even less sense. Don't ever let them make up games.

I added in the pillow as a force multiplier. The pillow allowed for bounce; with enough force, a good rider could get up enough momentum to skip entire steps. With a slick pillowcase, you could even tumble end over end. Timing was inexact, but on a straight-shot, saltbox-house staircase, the fastest times ranged somewhere around 1.5 seconds.

Progress on the project was halted when an experimental double-pillow run went awry and sent the rider headfirst into a mirror hung at the bottom of the stairs. Sorry about that, Mom. We immediately moved to Tennessee for six years, and then to Florida. Seven years bad luck for breaking a mirror is no myth.

II. Dry Jousting: March 1987

Matching beverage: Jolt Cola. Flavor profile: like Tab brewed with hydrochloric acid.

ARRANGED DURING an extremely unsupervised middle school recess. Competitors stood on railroad ties placed over a drainage ditch, and then battled to see who could knock the other off. All forms of contact were allowed, including groin shots if you had the balance. No one did, and attempts to land such blows were the cause of at least half of all defeats. (Do not ask why there were railroad ties just lying around. It's as much of a mystery as "Why do middle school boys love to punch each other in the balls?")

Progress on this promising sport was halted when I was thrown off by a 250-pound twelve-year-old and landed headfirst on a rock. I heard bells for hours and saw children who did not exist in the trees.

III. Medicine Kick Ball: April 1987

Matching beverage: Grape drink. Flavor profile: cough syrup and the plastic of the barrel-shaped container it came in.

KICKBALL, BUT PLAYED with a ten-pound medicine ball. Stopped after one at-bat and one broken toe. Actually overseen by a licensed educator from the state of Tennessee. Don't ever let your children be in Tennessee.

IV. Mumblety-Leg: June 1988

Matching beverage: Slurpee Suicide. Flavor profile: plaid.

A VARIATION on the popular nineteenth-century game of dropping a knife, business end first, into the ground. The variation here is that an actual leg belonging to someone was on the ground, and the knife used was one of those gigantic, Rambo-sized survival knives advertised in the back of *Boys' Life* for children's consumption. The large handles of the knives usually contained fishing wire, matches, a wire handsaw—and, in one recursive case, *a smaller knife kept inside your larger knife's handle*. It was pure homicide you could order for \$17.99, but it worked a lot better than the bullshit hovercraft made from a vacuum cleaner.

We played this for quite a while, until a glancing blow slashed open my leg. One of the participants is now a doctor who supervises life-and-death decisions on a daily basis. I lost my wallet gambling poorly on this trip, too.

Boy Scouts is a worthy endeavor because it encourages risky behavior with knives, gambling, and homosexual experimentation. If you can't take your child to New Orleans and leave him alone for days on end legally, remember: You can always enroll him in the Boy Scouts of America.

V. Car Luge: February–June 1990

Matching beverage: Milwaukee's Best. Flavor profile: tin, wilted flowers, with notes of regret.

I HAD A FRIEND who insisted on being called "Dart." His real name was Lon, so this was a push. "Dart" was the foremost practitioner of car luge, the safer, more sensible option to "car surfing." Hell, if you had

a car with a sunroof, the grip of a passenger lowered the risk of serious injury to something close to "only partially definite." I slid off a car hood going fifteen miles per hour or so and broke a finger I never told anyone about. It still locks up and refuses to bend for minutes at a time. Being my middle finger, this makes for some great fun in conversations.

Dart flew off in my cul-de-sac on one ill-fated turn and had to be taken to a friend's mother, an ER nurse, to be sewn up. She was like a mafia doctor in that when you really didn't want to go to anyone else, you could go to her. When Dart came to school the next day, half his face gone like Harvey Dent in a Cure t-shirt, we all remembered she was a nurse, and not a plastic surgeon.

VI. Multi-platform Backyard Gymnastics: Spring 1991

Matching beverage: wine coolers stolen from a parent's refrigerator. Flavor profile: a bum rolled in a gutter full of car air fresheners.

PLAYERS ENGAGED in various combinations of gymnastic maneuvers between elements present in especially cool backyards: trampoline, roof, and—in special situations—a swimming pool. You didn't have to try to do it, girl whose name will be protected for the good of "those people who do not want their children to have easy ammunition." Off the roof, flip off the trampoline, and then into the pool was a lot to ask of anyone, especially someone with no previous professional gymnastic experience.

The full-leg cast made your ass look like a levitating sphere of a perfect world the gods only allow us to catch glimpses of. You should know that, even if it's twenty years too late and just a distant aching memory in your long-healed femur. You were the most beautiful temporary cripple I will and have ever seen. 🍷

Spencer Hall is the editor of the college football blog "Every Day Should be Saturday."

PHOTO, PAGE 8: istockphoto.com/richvintage.



WHY WE WATCH

On the farm
with the ghost

by Wright Thompson



EVENTUALLY THIS WILL BE A STORY about a Frito pie, and the reasons we are drawn to stadiums, but that comes later, after the party hosted by the warden. It's a garden party, and from the look of it, one partially staffed by murderers and thieves. I wish prison buffet stations included not only a description of the dish but the crime of the person serving it: MAC N CHEESE—STABBED MOTHER 42 TIMES WITH AN ICE PICK.

I'm in a hellish bend of murky river called Angola, Louisiana, and today is the annual prison rodeo. In one of those odd twists in the life of a sportswriter, I'm the guest of Billy Cannon—The Billy Cannon: football player, counterfeiter, felon, bayou legend. Everyone in Louisiana knows about his punt return on Halloween, 1959, has seen the black-and-white footage. In the hallway of a fancy New York City hotel, I once watched an LSU man recognize Cannon and proceed to recite the radio play-by-play. In some ways, that sepia image trailed

Billy off the field, a shackle, pulling him back toward the past, yet away from the people who watched him run. He exists in black and white, so it's startling to see him in person, with bright blue eyes and a weathered, reddish nose.

"Are you Billy Cannon?" an LSU fan asks.

"I'm what's left of him," Cannon says.

The warden, a bowling ball of a man named Burl Cain—who once told me that everything was "peaches but the can, chicken but the feet," which I'm still trying to decipher—notes the way people react to the former running back, who, after his own release from federal prison, is now the Louisiana State Penitentiary dentist.

"Everybody loves Billy Cannon," the warden says.

Cannon is telling stories, about raising his horses, about the way Tiger Stadium glows at night. The fascination with him is a

strange thing to see up close, even stranger to articulate. It's not just that he's a famous athlete. There's something else they see in him, or want to see, which is why they crowd around. Everyone knows why he went to jail, about his burying counterfeit bills in coolers around his farm, so it's a little funny when he pulls out a check he got for signing his name for a few hours.

"I'm gonna throw it in a deep hole," he says.

He pauses.

"Horses," he says.

As much as Billy Cannon loves his horses, people want to hear him talk football, so the conversation moves eventually to the current LSU team.

"They could have used you," someone jokes.

Billy smiles.

"They'd have killed me," he says.

This goes on. It's sort of like they're seeing a ghost. They all know the punt return, can see each grainy cut and juke, and ... and ... it's never occurred to them that there's a real man who did those things, who remembers the punt return in color. Everyone knows what Billy Cannon did, but nobody knows how, or why, or what it was like to be young and untouchable.

Finally, it's time to go down the road to the arena, where convicts will get in the ring with bulls. Cannon excuses himself. He'd rather go play with his horses, he says, walking off alone down the road.

The bull coldly picks them off, the hits landing with a sickening thud, and the last man to flinch wins.



I sit in the warden's box, eating—FRITO PIE—BURNED DOWN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL—and looking into the arena floor. Stone-cold killers sit at a card table, playing chicken with a pissed-off bull. Get on YouTube and watch this; search "convict poker." The bull coldly picks them off, the hits landing with a sickening thud, and the last

man to flinch wins. I sit down the row from the white-haired warden, who looks like Caesar, presiding in judgment over all he surveys—plantation fields, an elaborate mechanism for killing his fellow man, a rodeo, and one former Heisman Trophy-winning tailback. But, it occurs to me, he doesn't own, or even know, their thoughts. Nor do I.

I don't know why they're here, or what brought them into this ring with this animal, and I don't know what made Billy Cannon run, or what it felt like on a long-ago Halloween night, when everything in his world was, briefly, perfect. There are people who watch, and there are people who do, and the tiny space between the two cannot be bridged. Whether it's a dusty jail or the loudest football stadium in the world, there is something known only to the man in the arena. Maybe that's why we watch—a prison rodeo, a punt return, an old man at a garden party.

Maybe this time we'll know, if only for a breath, what it's like to be them. 🍷

Gravy guest editor Wright Thompson is a senior writer for ESPN.com and ESPN The Magazine.

PHOTO, PAGE 13: *Untitled*, from the series *Nothing to Lose* (2010), by Darryl Richardson.



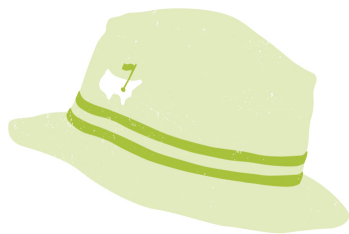
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IN MEMORIAM

A sportswriter's legacy

FURMAN BISHER DIED THIS SPRING, at ninety-one, and he will never be replaced. Forever, it seemed like, he wrote columns for the newspaper in Atlanta, bringing the world of sports to the South, creating a bond with readers that never broke. How long did he churn out good copy? Put it this way: One of his career highlights was scoring a sit-down with Shoeless Joe Jackson. Despite his success, he always made time for young sportswriters (including this one), and his loss was felt across our community. At the Masters shortly after he died, the tournament kept his seat open, placing his trademark bucket hat there in memory. In our own way, we wanted to honor his memory, so here is one of Bisher's favorite recipes, straight from the files of his mother. We miss you, Furman. —30—.

—Wright Thompson

CHOCOLATE SHEATH CAKE*

2 cups sugar	½ cup buttermilk
2 cups self-rising flour	2 eggs
½ cup cooking oil (Crisco)	1 teaspoon vanilla
4 tablespoons cocoa	1 teaspoon soda
1 stick oleo	1 teaspoon cinnamon
1 cup water	

Stir together sugar and flour and put into large mixing bowl. Place oleo, Crisco, cocoa, and water into saucepan and bring to a rapid boil. Pour over flour and sugar mixture, beating well. Mix together buttermilk, eggs, cinnamon, soda, and vanilla and pour into other mixture and then into greased and floured 15 ½ x 10 x 1" pan. Bake at 400 degrees for about 20 minutes. 🍷

*Sheath cake is sometimes found in community cookbooks and personal recipes to mean sheet cake.



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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.

www.southernfoodways.org • 662-915-5993 • sfamail@olemiss.edu

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SOUTHERN FOODWAYS ALLIANCE
Center for the Study of Southern Culture
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