Alliance's popular series serves up a fifty-three-course celebration of Southern foods, Southern cooking, and the people and traditions behind them. Editors Dale Volberg Reed and John Shelton Reed have combed magazines, newspapers, books, and journals to gather some of the best food writing by such authors as **Edna Lewis, Rick Bragg, Hal Crowther,** and **R. W. Apple Jr.** *Cornbread Nation 4* is certain to satisfy everyone from omnivorous chowhounds to the most discerning students of regional foodways.

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Highlights

- **Pat Conroy** visits Birmingham's Highlands Bar & Grill.
- **Amy Evans's** photographic essay of oystering in Apalachicola Bay.
- **Lolis Eric Elie** tells how post-Katrina New Orleans is, in the words of a local cook, "coming back through people's stomachs and their appetites."
- **Molly O'Neill** muses on the South's almost religious connection to sugar.
- **Beth Ann Fennelly** recalls a culinary North-meets-South moment that gave rise to a not-so-red velvet cake.
- **Jack Hitt** searches for the soul of lowcountry food along the South Carolina backroads.
- **Matt and Ted Lee** observe a cook at work on a chicken purloo, a dish as African as it is American.
- **Recipes** for roux, braised collard greens, doberge cake, and other dishes.

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The Best of Southern Food Writing

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Edited by **Dale Volberg Reed** and **John Shelton Reed**

General Editor, **John T. Edge**

Is There a Difference between Southern and Soul?

Shaun Chavis

Drive into Chapel Hill, North Carolina, on a typical March weekend, and you will see Franklin Street humming with students and alumni, many wearing Carolina sky blue. Spot a few people on street corners holding signs that read, "I need tickets," and you'll know the madness is only hours away from its peak. This is where Michael Jordan played basketball for Dean Smith, it's where legendary battles are fought on the hardwood every spring, and it's where pride bursts like the wide-open flowers of the dogwood trees.

The Tobacco Road rivalry is just one battle with Southern roots. You certainly don't have to drive far from Chapel Hill to walk across battlefields of the Civil War. And there is yet another ongoing fight with roots in the American South, one without territory or uniforms. It is a battle for identity and acknowledgment, both things any proud person would fight for. In October 2004 it erupted in Oxford, Mississippi, on the campus of Ole Miss, where writers, chefs, restaurateurs, historians, and other members of the Southern Foodways Alliance gathered to talk about race, food, and the South. Passions rose as people argued about Southern food and soul food, debating which cuisine came from where, who taught whom how to cook, and whether there ought to be just one name for both.

You might look at this scene and wonder why it exists. You'd rather go get some deviled eggs or fried chicken, and Southern or soul, as long as it tastes good and the sweet tea keeps comin' (or maybe you'd prefer Tennessee whiskey), who cares? Certainly there are better things to debate, and even so, you're not going to get into them now, not with that Jack Daniel's in your hand.

Dr. Jessica Harris is a member of the Southern Foodways Alliance, an author, and a culinary historian. She's got an explanation worth thinking about. "Your food is your heritage. We're passionate about it because in some cases we didn't get it when we were growing up. Certainly for African Americans, it is one of the few things we can claim, and need to claim, and we are discussing it. I think the passion comes from that. And certainly there is a subcutaneous discussion: somewhere in that room, someone's granddad owned someone else's granddad. All the more so, we grew it, cooked it, served it, cleaned up the waste it caused, and didn't always get to eat it. That's a big problem."

The notion of getting rid of either name, Southern or soul, is enough to offend, because you're not just talking about renaming food. "It's an emotional, valid, African American identity. It's an emotional trigger," said Nathalie Dupree, SFA member and cookbook author. "I think the emotionalism is that white people, too, think this is their food."

In Chapel Hill, one street over from Franklin, on Rosemary, is a restaurant Michael Jordan himself enjoyed, a place where food writer Craig Claiborne found a suitable plate of chitlins. It looks like a one-story house with a wraparound porch filled with chairs and tables. A sign out front, shaped like a kettle, reads "Mama Dip's Traditional Country Cooking." On a typical weekend, you may circle a few times looking for a parking space, and then wait forty-five minutes for a table. Yet the lobby still fills with people of all ages and races, some wearing their Sunday best, some wearing Carolina colors, all dressed with devotion. A board lists the day's specials: fresh flounder, fresh oysters, collards, corn pudding, pineapple coconut cake, rum raisin bread pudding, and blueberry cobbler. At the bottom, in sky blue letters: "Go Heels!" A gray-haired white gentleman calls out, "There she is. Dip, come on out heah!" Out of the kitchen comes a black woman in her mid-seventies, six feet and one inch tall, wearing a brown and black dotted short-sleeve blouse. This is Mildred Council, also known as Mama Dip.

No one's ever uncomfortable at Dip's, because comfort is what you get on your plate: fried green tomatoes, served piping hot as any fried food should be, with the taste of the sun's warmth in them. The mac and cheese is so creamy, you want a spoon to gather all the sauce. A light sweetness kisses the yams. The biscuits are small by America's commercial super-sized standards, but what's size got to do with goodness? They are two inches across, if that, and just as high as they are wide, ideal carriers for butter or the savory juices on your plate. Peach cobbler in March is just as delicious as in August, because Council buys locally grown peaches and freezes them for meals like this. The cobbler's so good, you don't want to eat anything else for the rest of the day so you can savor its lingering flavors.

You'll find some of the same ingredients used at Magnolia Grill, a restaurant that's about a twenty-minute drive away in Durham. The simple green building gives little hint of what Ben and Karen Barker have built inside. Here, the couple interprets Southern food with the elegance and creative mix appropriate for fine dining, and they have done it to national acclaim. Just as you might feel warmly welcomed at Mama Dip's, you're no less cared for at Magnolia Grill. Paintings on the walls spill their colors into the room; warm lighting and thoughtfully placed tables create a space just as right for treating your mother on her birthday as it is for charming a lover. The Barkers give passionate attention to the food as well: Ben knows exactly what's on your plate before the waiter carries it to your table. "I hope to retire before I can't see all the food go away from me," he says.

Magnolia Grill's menu changes with the seasons. They cure pork themselves, and preserve locally grown produce for use in off-season months. At any time, you may find greens, ham hocks, grits, pork chops, or sweet potatoes mingling with other, more exotic flavors: twice-baked grits soufflé with wild and exotic mushroom ragout, aged sherry-mushroom emulsion and shaved confit foie gras, for example, or curried sweet potato bisque with shrimp, toasted coconut, and sultana chutney. For dessert, the Southern combination of peanut butter and bananas may be served in the form of a phyllo napoleon, with a milk chocolate sauce. Magnolia Grill is a place where, the Barkers are very aware, visiting Yankees may taste traditional Southern ingredients for the first time. "I guarantee you we're the only white-tablecloth restaurant in the Triangle that serves creasy greens," said Ben.

This corner of North Carolina is as much Ben Barker's home as it is Council's. Barker grew up a few hours' drive away. "My grandparents and my aunt and uncle ran a tobacco farm, and had sharecropped it with neighbors I grew up with who were black. . . . I was mostly taken care of, when I would stay with them, by Louise, who was the black lady that minded me like a ma. But I never really thought that there was any difference in the food that we ate, that she fixed or that my aunt fixed or that my grandmother fixed. Their style of cooking was the same, the ingredients that they chose to use were the same."

Move the foie gras aside, and you'll see Magnolia Grill and Mama Dip's share some roots. Both Ben Barker and Council draw on common history and flavors to create their cuisines. Barker's food is Southern, and some call Council's food soul. She, however, doesn't, not even in her cookbook, *Mama Dip's Kitchen*. "When the cookbook came out, I called the food country cooking, and then when people started coming in, especially if they were black, they would call it soul food, and I was telling them that my cooking is country cooking because I didn't hear about soul food until in the '60s, during the demonstrations. Blacks came to be more visible on television and out in the

world. That's when they started calling it soul food. But our food, the food I cook is just country, because I cook fresh food, fresh vegetables."

You'd be right to think there's not much culinary difference between Southern food and soul food. Pick up a copy of Nathalie Dupree's *New Southern Cooking*, and you'll find recipes for black-eyed peas with duck giblets, old-style greens and pot likker, fried green tomatoes, and peach cobbler. Thumb through *Sylvia's Soul Food* by Harlem restaurateur Sylvia Woods, and there are recipes for black-eyed peas and rice, collard greens with cornmeal dumplings, fried green tomatoes, and peach cobbler. Or consider the works of Edna Lewis, the Virginia-reared granddaughter of slaves who treated New York to her culinary talent first in the 1940s at Cafe Nicholson. Her published recipes include black-eyed peas in tomato and onion sauce, greens, fried tomatoes, and peach cobbler. (Lewis, by the way, didn't use the term *soul food* in her books.)

People started using the term *soul food* in the '60s, when black Americans were redefining themselves. Men were "soul brothers," women were "soul sisters," and they grooved to "soul music." New Jersey poet and civil rights activist Amiri Baraka is likely the first person to put the words "soul food" into print. In 1962, he wrote an essay addressing another writer's criticism that the problem with "Negroes" in America was that they had no language of their own and no characteristic cuisine—both elements of cultural identity. "This to me is the deepest stroke, the unkindest cut, of oppression," Baraka wrote, and he pointed out items brought to America from Africa, such as watermelon. He listed the foods on the black American table: sweet potato pies, greens, hoppin' John, hush puppies, and fish sandwiches, all "soul food." Baraka didn't define a cuisine as much as he exposed an element of black American identity, an identity much needed as an anchor during a time when blacks fought through a social storm to gain civil rights.

Just as people used the term *soul* to define themselves and create a community of acceptance and belonging, today groups of people who call themselves "neo-Confederates" are rallying around their own definition of "Southern": a culture they see as primarily "Anglo-Celtic." Their adopted language is the king's English, and their slogan is "heritage, not hate"—a message many don't buy. "It's by its nature hateful because it's exclusive," said John T. Edge, director of the Southern Foodways Alliance. "They use the term *Southern culture* and mean white Southern culture. Southern culture is a multiracial culture. When you talk about the South, you are, whether you know it or not, talking about white folks and black folks, Native Americans, and many other ethnicities. I think a term like *Southern food* embraces it all."

Harris, author of *The Welcome Table: African American Heritage Cooking*, is not sure she likes the term *soul food*. "Most African Americans in my

experience did not say, 'I'm going to get some soul food' until the '60s," she said. "Bottom line, it was dinner. All cultures have food for the soul, and this is just the food for the soul for African Americans." To Harris, the term *Southern* can also fit. "All soul food is Southern, but not all Southern is soul food, in the sense that most African American food, in the narrow sense, has its genesis in the South. . . . There are dishes in the Southern culinary lexicon that are not soul food at all—country captain, for example."

It isn't as if the declaration of a cuisine called "soul food" in the '60s took its dishes off anyone else's table, nor has it kicked anyone out of the kitchen. Fighting over which food is mine and not yours isn't the point of the effort to link food and heritage—doing so, to many, is futile. Council, for example, sees her cuisine as American (though you could also call it Southern, soul, or country). "I don't like just to say it's just for blacks, that it represents blacks," Council said. "It's everybody's food. I wouldn't want to say that they took it away from us, like they took a lot of things, but they want to use it, use it."

"The better point made is that there is a debt of acknowledgment that white Southerners owe to black Southerners," said Edge. "It is a debt of acknowledgment that has not been erased. That's a different matter than saying, 'this food is black folks' food' or 'this food is white folks' food.'"

Ben Barker knows his taste for creasy greens came from his black neighbor Louise, and it's that memory, that flavor, he consciously tries to preserve. "I think it's important to try and keep doing that kind of cooking. Now, because I'm a white guy cooking it, does that mean it's not soul food? Maybe. But Louise used to cook that for me, because she'd gather the greens up on the way over to my aunt's house and she'd fix up creasy greens for lunch. I don't ever remember my aunt cooking creasy greens."

Barker's experience is one example of why it is so difficult to distinguish two separate cuisines. The food, and the people, are commingled. "There is so much integration of foods and attitudes in the South, which perhaps people from the North don't really realize," said Dupree. "In the South, for all of its flaws and difficulties, within the food there has been an enormous cross-over, not just from African Americans working in white homes, but it's from intermarriage, it's from people having farms next to each other. Everything here has been intertwined, which is what has made this a distinct culture."

Economy is also a common element in the foods of the South: what people ate depended more upon resources than ethnicity. "When I talk to some people, they think somebody called it soul food because we like food with the bones in it," Council said. "We like fish with the bones, we like our pieces of meat with the bones, we like the pig tails, we like the neck bones. What happened is that it was affordable. We're always getting the big packet of

pork chops because it's cheaper. It's got more bones in it and it comes from the economy part of the roast, you understand. . . . It was about economy, you know, what we could afford. It wasn't about [race], because white people bought those big things too, and they ate them."

Barker agreed, again drawing on his family experience. "I think what most distinguishes [them] in general from an intellectual perspective is the choice of protein that you might use because of the cost of it. But because both families were farm families, the proteins that we ate were yard chickens and hog products that they raised themselves."

"The core is, these are the foods of poverty," said Edge. "Granted, African Americans have suffered more at the hands of poverty than perhaps many whites. There's a heck of a lot of poor white folks out there that are gnawing on pork chop bones and eating the hell out of chitlins, too."

Culinary historians have traced specific elements in Southern cuisine to their African roots. Okra, watermelon, peanuts, pumpkin, and black-eyed peas, for example, came to the United States from Africa. Techniques such as deep frying, seasoning food with small pieces of smoked meats, and making fritters all have some element of Africa in them.

Dig a little deeper, and you'll discover that peanuts were indigenous to South America and introduced to Africa by Portuguese explorers. The slave trade brought peanuts to North America. The use of nuts and seeds as a thickening agent is also an idea from Africa, but the Arabs have used ground almonds to thicken sauces since the thirteenth century and perhaps earlier. Is it possible the Arabs passed that practice on to others as they traveled through north Africa? Some scholars believe black-eyed peas may have come to Africa from Asia. And while we get the word *yam* from Africa, the actual vegetable never made the Atlantic crossing. The American sweet potato became the yam's substitute.

Truth be told, throughout history, someone's always taken ideas from someone else's kitchen. We still do it.

"You see this over and over again," Dupree said. "You go to an Afghani restaurant and you love the food. And then you get a recipe of something you liked, but you may not have all the ingredients, so you substitute. So then, whose recipe is it? Is it Afghani? Is it yours? The English have always cooked with small pieces of meat and greens. Turnips and rutabagas proliferate there. How do you put your finger on this? So then, you have to ask yourself, why do you want to put your finger on this? The answer is because African Americans have been robbed."

This is why a battle exists. "There are no people who have been less embraced, with the possible exception of Indians, than African Americans," said

Jessica Harris. "American food is changing like the country is changing. There are all sorts of things that are becoming American—pizza is American, sushi is becoming virtually American, mojitos. I think the slowness with which the food of African Americans has been accepted speaks to the slowness with which the people are being accepted. Go to a Barnes and Noble and look at the cookbooks—shelves and shelves of Chinese cookbooks, Cuban cookbooks, just about everything outnumbers African American cookbooks."

Chef Barker also senses a lag in racial reconciliation. "I feel like we've come a long way, and not nearly the way we should have come by now," he said. "It seems like to me there was such tremendous progress in the '60s, and then people became apathetic about what it takes to make us a whole country."

The very language used to describe Southern and soul food is a hurdle on the path to harmony, simply because of the politics behind the words. The term *soul food* gives African American heritage an acknowledgment it hasn't fully received, yet signals white Americans are excluded. *Southern* is used by some to encompass a multiethnic culture, and by others as a racist code word. "The South has a uniquely troubled history," said Edge. "Even those of us who don't spend a lot of time pondering that, it's kind of subcutaneous. It's still a part of our experience. I think we realize—some of us reluctantly so—how our food is weighted with this legacy."

If food is a point of contention, it can also be an agent of unity. The many culinary professionals who attend the Southern Foodways Alliance's symposia know this firsthand: they take raw ingredients, apply culinary skill, serve, and watch food build relationships and create lifelong memories. It's as awesome as any force of nature. Many in this crowd believe racial reconciliation will happen around the table, and, in fact, they left Ole Miss last October with a charge to start dialogues around tables in their own communities. "I think it will happen through food, intermarriage—let's face it, it is happening," said Dupree. "Society is becoming accepting of things that my generation couldn't, things that are very natural and normal. I think food is just one aspect of it. If you can come to my house and enjoy the food and be comfortable, then I think that we have a better chance of having a good conversation."

"I think the simple act of breaking bread together, of that kind of communion in not necessarily the religious sense but in the humanistic sense—I think that offers opportunities for all," said Edge. "The most intimate act we engage in every single day is eating, and it fosters bonds and breaks down some of those chasms."

"I can feel it," Council agrees. "Since the five years I've been out there, just the five years since I've put the cookbook out, this is what I feel all over the country." She likely knows this from daily experience. Mama Dip walks

through the dining room of her restaurant, going from table to table, often sitting down right next to her customers. "How y'all doin' over here?" she says. The noise is thick: there is clinking of dishes and silverware from the kitchen and a moderate roar of conversation. Now and then you hear Council's laughter above it all. Sometimes she laughs so hard, she takes her glasses off and wipes a tear from her eye. Council has long belonged to this community. In the '40s and '50s, she cooked on campus and for local families. Since she opened her restaurant in 1976, every North Carolina governor and UNC–Chapel Hill chancellor has dined at her tables. It has taken her decades to battle her way from being a domestic worker hidden behind kitchen doors to being a businesswoman whose contributions are honored and sought after. Even after this long time, she may have to confront stereotypes each time a stranger to Mama Dip's comes in to eat. "I have a lot of white customers and I have black customers," Council said. "I didn't want them to come here, 'let's go get some soul food at Mama Dip's.' I want to be an American woman. You understand? That's what I want to be."

This is an edited and shortened transcript of an address—a talk, really—given at the Southern Foodways Alliance symposium "Southern Food in Black and White" in 2004. It has been left informal, as it was delivered.

Movement Food

Bernard Lafayette

I want first of all to say, "Good afternoon," so you can tell I'm from the South. We always greet each other—"good morning," "good afternoon," you know.

When they invited me to come and speak to this conference, I said, "*Race* and *food*?" I could not imagine what y'all were doing. They said, "Well, you know, one unique thing about you is that you've been in jail twenty-seven times, so you could tell us about food in jail." So I guess I can make a unique contribution, after all.

When I was in the fourth grade I went up north with my parents. They all migrated from Tampa, Florida, to Philadelphia right after the war. I went to an integrated school. I remember one time this white boy hauled off and socked this black boy and I said, "Good Lord." Then another white guy stepped up and hit the white guy. And then a black one stepped up and hit the white guy for hitting the white guy. I was traumatized. The whole world went topsy-turvy.

Well, long story short, I got involved in the gangs and stuff like that and a couple of fellows I was with got shot and killed, so they sent me back south. They said, "Well, you have to stay with your grandmother and she's going to take care of you," but she was bedridden. So they said, "This is a good reason you should go, because you're going to take care of her," and so I became a nurse at the age of twelve, and it was really quite an experience because she taught me how to cook from the bedside. I also grew the food, because we had a victory garden from World War II. So instead of grandmother taking care of me I took care of grandmother, and she taught me how to take care of her. That's what happened. She had a big ol' two-story house with wrap-around outside porches and all that—that's what I grew up in and went back to.

I'm a good cook. I don't have any recipes. I just know how much to put in there—that kind of thing. I can cook possum. We call it "dressing"