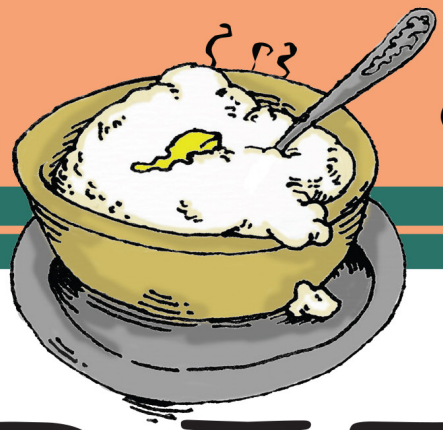

GRITS TO GLORY

How Southern Cookin' Got So Good

Joe Johnston


GRITS
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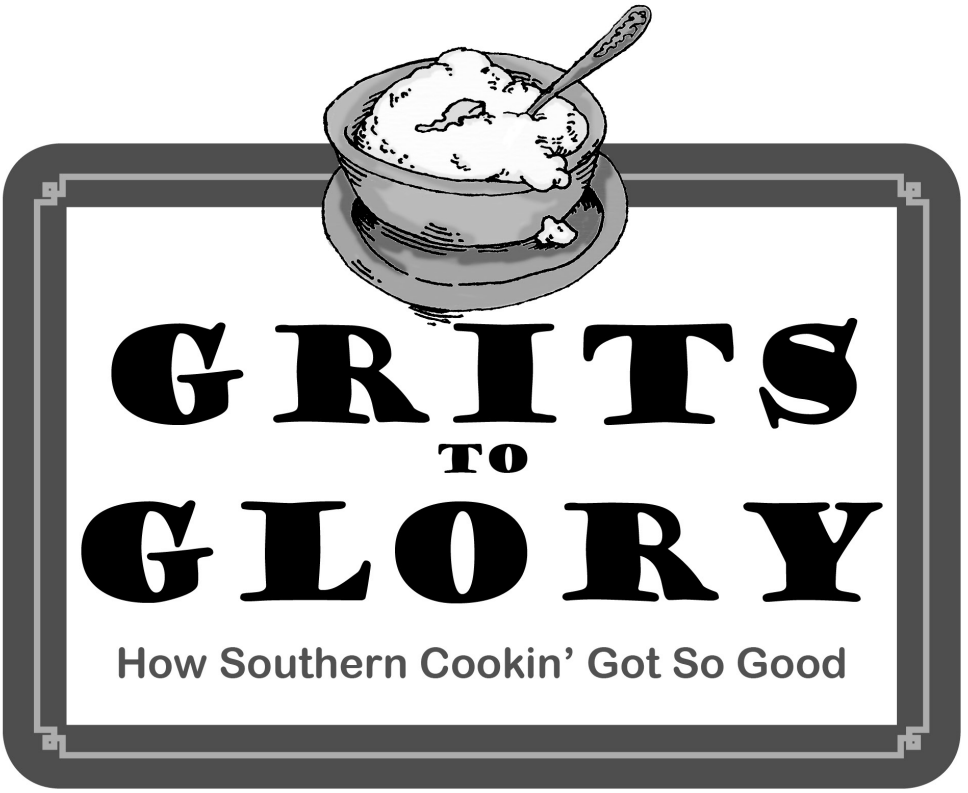

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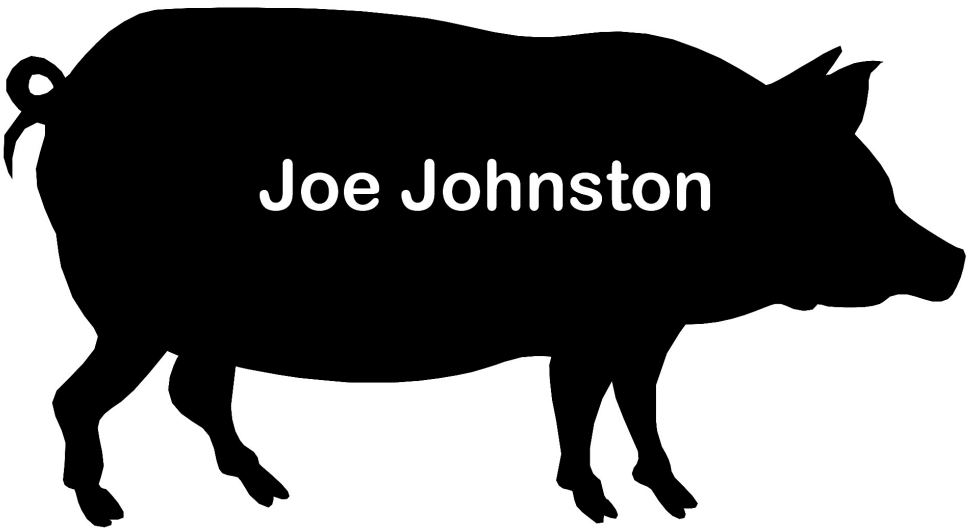

Joe Johnston

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Dedicated to my sons, Luke and Will, men of taste

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Many men, like this army cook, learned during the Civil War how to acquire, preserve, and cook food. That knowledge was precious when they returned home. (Courtesy of Library of Congress)

Acknowledgements

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Photos not otherwise credited are from my collection.

The Dennis family of Nashville gathers around the table after church and a big meal to share card games, love, and laughter. (Courtesy of Debbie Smartt)

Introduction

One evening when I was a kid, I walked down the street with my parents for dinner at Harden's Hamburgers. While we were eating our burgers and fries, I noticed a man I'd never seen before back in the kitchen. He was a stocky, white-haired, older fellow with a white mustache and goatee, and under his apron he wore a white shirt with a black string tie like the ones I'd seen in western movies. "Who's that?" I asked the waitress, Addy.

"That's a man from Kentucky, Colonel Sanders, he calls himself. He's trying to sell us his fried chicken recipe," Addy sneered. We all laughed. Trying to sell a fried chicken recipe to a burger place!

The Colonel was standing over the stove, and I could see a tray of golden chicken on the counter beside him. Pretty soon Johnny Harden walked around with the tray, introduced us to the Colonel, and offered everyone in the place a piece. Then they came back around to ask what we all thought. They honestly wanted to know, so we told them it was delicious. A week or so later, Johnny started serving the Colonel's chicken, as did a lot of other restaurants around the country, and that eventually led to Colonel Sanders opening his own restaurants.

Today, the Colonel's Kentucky Fried Chicken, with all its slick national promotion, and its new products that flash in the frying pan and die, still does most of its business in the rural South. Why? Well, it's surely not because Southern mamas can't fry chicken. Southern mamas can fry chicken just fine, thank you very much. But KFC is the next best thing to Mama's. It doesn't matter that the Colonel has gone on to that big kitchen in the sky. Or that KFC is owned by a corporation that owns a bunch of other restaurants. What matters is that there's a real Southern person behind that chicken, who had a recipe he wanted to share, so he loaded his pressure cooker in the trunk of his car and drove across America cooking up samples. Sure, that's salesmanship. But the Colonel wasn't selling only chicken. He was also selling the feeling that somebody's smiling Grandpa cared enough to cook up a delicious taste of home, just for us. He was selling hospitality.

Every part of the world has its history and culture, and in the American South, the history and culture are awash in hospitality. We know how to have a good time, and we prefer to have it served with good manners. People here still say, "Yes, sir," and "No, ma'am." We hold the door open for each other. We nod and smile in the grocery store as we talk to people we've never met, and almost anything from a birthday to a full moon can be a reason for a grill-out. At every turn we see family, community, and memories, wrapped up in the story of Southern food.

So isn't it amazing that an Okie like me, and

some other Southerners, created McDonald's world-famous Happy Meal while working in a Northern ad agency? It was a time when the nation was picking up its pace. Busy young married couples, working two jobs and taking their kids to soccer practice and dance lessons, were the best customers for a McDonald's fifteen cent burgers. Trouble was, back then, kids didn't like those burgers, so those little families didn't go to McDonald's. We simply printed some pictures and games on the packages, threw in a toy, called it the "Fun Meal," and pretty soon, kids started taking their parents to McDonald's. Why were we the ones who invented it? Because all over the country, fast-food joints were trying to sell more hamburgers, but our little team, who came from five Southern states, were thinking about the people who were going to eat those burgers. We gave them what they wanted, even when they didn't know themselves. We wrapped hospitality in fun.

Fast food got bigger and faster, with lower quality and less taste. American working families traded home and hospitality for ad slogans and sameness. Yet, when I moved back to the South, I found that none of that had changed the heart of Southern Cookin'. In Memphis, there was still a barbecue joint on every corner. The folks in Louisiana still salivated at the most casual mention of sucking crawdad heads. And I discovered a little café in Forsythe, Georgia that serves a Caesar salad with croutons made of grits. That's the kind of thing you don't see in Pittsburgh or Denver. By the same token, bagels with lox are on the menu at every restaurant in New Jersey, but they're impossible to find in south Mississippi. I asked myself, "How come folks around here eat grits, and folks up there don't?"

The answer is a story that began during our nation's Colonial and Revolutionary years, when the American South created a unique culture. Then it all fell, decimated by Civil War, and then in the last half of the 1800s, the culinary phoenix of the American South rose from the ashes of that war. The Southern way of living and eating was reborn, stronger, better-tasting, and even more different from the rest of the country than before. It was the product of good people, close to the earth, close to their faith, and close to each other. They were black and white and Native American, many of them devastatingly poor, learning to live together in new ways. Through hardship and suffering, with resourcefulness and creativity, they managed to feed their families. That broad and deep legacy, which became the culinary and cultural stew that is the South today, has only happened in one place and at one time in the history of mankind.

What's even more astonishing is that the world has grown more homogenized, and yet, the South retains its charm. We live in a nation of immigrants' descendants who are more mobile than ever before, in an increasingly global society, with digital access to virtually all the world's recipes. Relatively new items in the American diet, like tacos, avocados, and quinoa, appear regularly on Southern tables. People everywhere watch Southerners wrestle, rescue, and eat alligators on reality TV shows. Wisconsin hosts a world championship barbecue contest, and McDonald's offers a Southern Style Chicken Sandwich. Cake, Korn, and the Black-Eyed Peas are bands, and *Fried Green Tomatoes* is a movie. Yet, in a world of changes, while America enjoys French and Asian cuisine, San Francisco style, Southwestern, and Tex Mex, there's a tradition, a style, an ethos we call Southern Cookin', that endures and flourishes, much the way it did 150 years ago. There's no other local, state, or regional cuisine in America that

is so pervasive, so entwined and identified with the history and lifestyle of a people, as Southern Cookin'.

Southern Cookin' isn't exactly a matter of where you cook it, and it's really not even a matter of where the recipes originated. Americans can find good barbecued ribs, fried okra, and grits on the menu all across the country. And the South certainly doesn't have a corner on church socials, pot luck dinners, good gravy, or good manners. What makes all the difference is the concentration and consistency of Southern-ness.

In this book, the "South" refers not only to the Deep South, along the Gulf Coast, but also the Carolinas, Virginia, West Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee. So is my home state of Oklahoma Southern? Consider the fact that our family's recipe for fried corn can be traced back five generations to southern Missouri, and before that, Tennessee, then North Carolina. During most of the 1800s, Oklahoma was Indian Territory, and then most of it was opened for others in great land runs. Many of the people who came were Southerners, and there's no better example of Oklahoma's cultural evolution than Elias Stanfield. He traveled all the way from Horse Cove, North Carolina, to try his luck in the land run of 1889, only to find that Oklahoma wasn't the Eden that the newspaper ads promised. How could he bring sweet Fanny McKinney, his half-Cherokee bride-to-be, out to that piece of parched red dirt? He abandoned the free land he had claimed, and went home to Fanny and the lush Carolina hills, where every year would bring plenty of game, grass for livestock, and a big vegetable garden. But they later moved to Arkansas, and their children, the grandchildren of Confederate veterans, ended up in Oklahoma. People kept coming from both North and South, blending their cultures in a loose, wild, entrepreneurial land that was open to every modern invention and design that came along, and yet preserved family traditions. Though the landscape is decidedly western, the kitchen culture has always leaned toward the South. And because Oklahoma is largely rural and agricultural, it shares the South's deep love of the land, as well as its struggles with poverty.

What about Missouri? Is it Southern? Before the Civil War, it was a slave state, populated largely by Southerners, but with cosmopolitan French roots and a lot of German immigrants. Kansas City looked westward, and St. Louis was literally and figuratively in the middle of the Mississippi River between New Orleans' Creoles and the Great Lakes' Scandinavians. Kentucky, West Virginia, and Virginia have similar stories, being decidedly Southern, but bordering on the North. That entire area along the Mason-Dixon Line became a laboratory for blending cultures in the evolution of Southern Cookin'.

What about Texas? It was a cotton-producing slave state, and later, a favorite destination for Confederate veterans. It's rural, agricultural, and ready for anyone who wasn't afraid to make their own way, which are all solidly Southern characteristics. It has a unique culture because living there simply requires living like Texans live. The beef on Texas plates, as well as a full calendar of chili cook-offs, set it apart from the rest of the South. And yet, Texans eat fresh seafood, like everybody else along the Gulf Coast, their pecan pies compete with Georgia's best, they're proud of their barbecue, and their welcome mat is always out.

So if state borders don't distinguish Southern Cookin', what does? It's a tradition of ingredients and recipes that are rich in pork, cornbread, gravy, fried foods, and fresh-from-

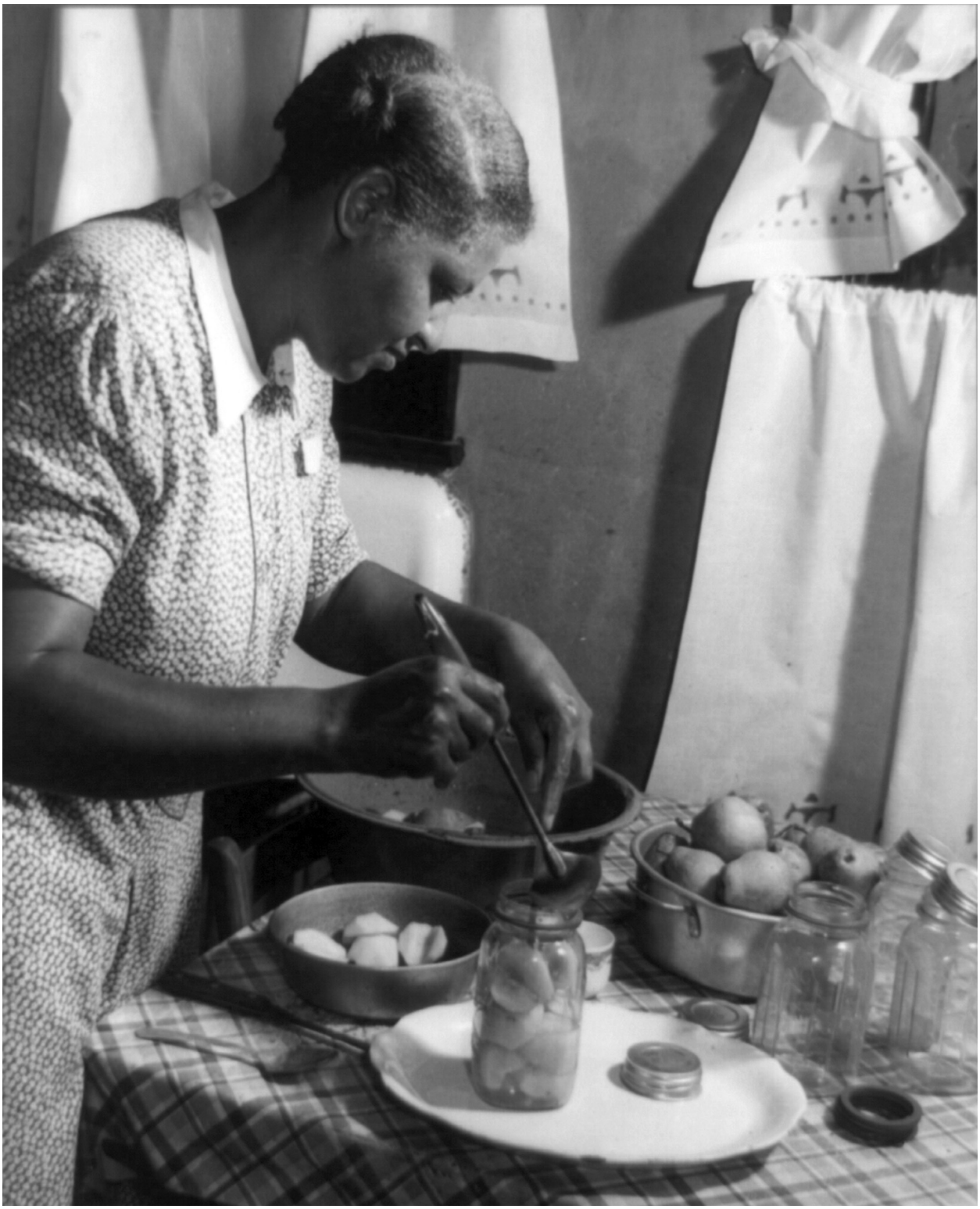
the-garden vegetables. But way beyond that, it's a celebration. It's gratitude in the harvest that begins anew every year as crops come in, and is appreciated with every spoonful of goodness, year-round. And it's the joy of making a lot out of a little. It's the everyday hospitality of, "We're glad you're here." It's a shout out the screen door to muddy, laughing children, "Ya'll wash up! Dinner's ready!"

If it sounds like we're blurring the lines between then and now, it's because that's what people do in the South. History is a compilation of close-up views that illuminate the big view. Little stories that explain big stories. It's the creek rising after spring rains that tell us why the town built a tall bridge there 200 years ago. It's the mint growing in a long-abandoned garden, whispering of hot tea to soften winter's icy grip. For the Southern cook, the best of what was, still is. To this day, the Southern table is equal parts heart and mind, stirred in with food, laughter, creativity, memory, love, and stories, all dished up on a 100-year-old, hand-painted platter that daddy's great aunt bought with money she made by taking in ironing. While we use microwaves and food processors, and while we've replaced our great grandmother's lard with olive oil, there's no way to replace the joy of following her hand-written recipes. Southern Cookin' is alive in remembered scenes of women in the kitchen wearing handmade aprons, men carving roasted wild turkeys, and big-eyed children giggling while they shuck the corn. It's alive in the family's favored dish, served with an old, familiar tale, which just happens to be the same tale that was told the last time that dish was served.

There's a place inside each of us that wants to know what it's like to walk into a barn and see the cow that gives us our milk. Or to stand at the end of a garden row, holding a basket of just-picked tomatoes with the sun on our shoulders. There are times when we wonder what it was like for our ancestors, sitting around a fire, sharing food they helped hunt, gather, and prepare. They were naïve scientists, experimenting, learning by doing, making their lives better. They knew the seasons of the moon and the best time to sow each crop. Plowing, planting, harvesting, butchering, canning peaches, and making apple butter, all turned into social occasions, times to get together and help each other, just like quiltings, barn raisings, and weddings. Life was marked by events, tied together with the sacred bonds of shared food and stories.

And we're not talking about just what Granny cooked. We're talking about her Granny, and hers. Southern Cookin' is rooted in simple dishes made in countless variations for generations. That's because our ancestors' hunger for food and family was fed the same way ours is fed. No matter how many imported spices we have in the pantry, or how complex the computer controls on our convection ovens, we still thrill at the sight and smell of butter drizzling into a slice of warm cornbread. We still delight in bacon and eggs sizzling in a handed-down cast iron skillet. Full-grown men still drool like babies when a serving spoon slides into a blackberry cobbler. For Southern cooks, the same care that goes into the entrée also goes into a bowl of mashed potatoes or a plate of fried squash, and our salads, breads, pickles, relishes, and jellies. We've got a dozen different scrumptious recipes for each one, and the main ingredient in all of them is love.

This book boils down a few hundred years of complex social and culinary history to pretty simple terms. There are big generalities and broad statements, and historians have a way of finding exceptions to broad statements. People in the South aren't all alike. Northerners and



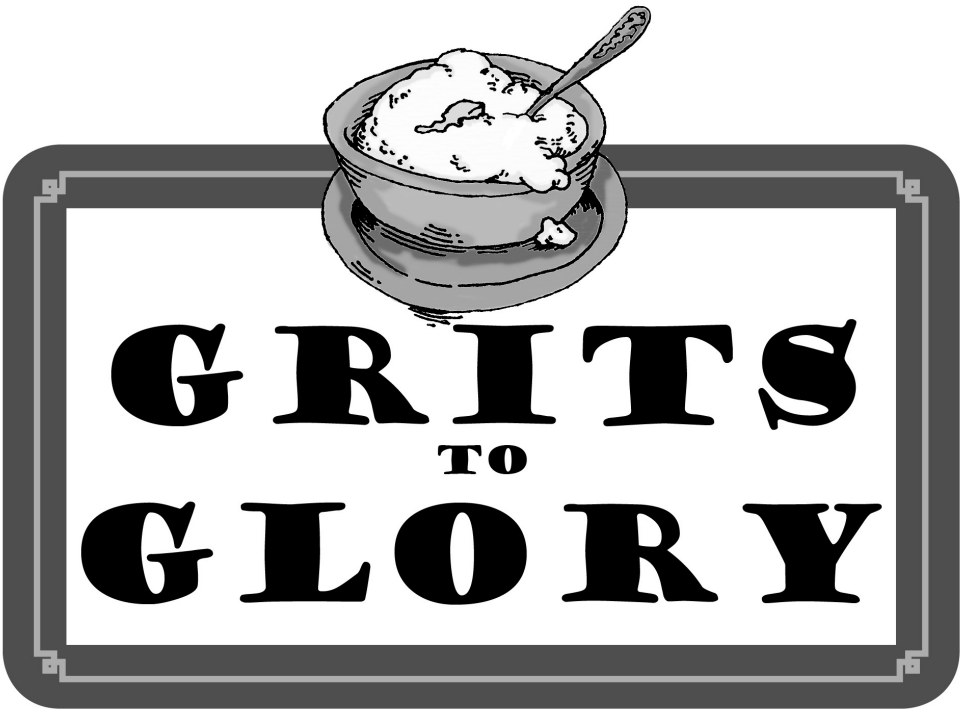
A farm wife in Madison Co., AL, cans her peaches. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress)

Southerners aren't mutually exclusive groups. But in this case, it's not the exceptions that tell the story. It's the grand sweep of time, revealed in authentic, dramatic, funny, and heart-warming anecdotes. It's the little stories that make up the big story. All we're really doing is answering that question, "How come folks around here eat grits, and folks up there don't?"

I love the South. Sure, there are unseemly aspects to the history of the South, just like every other place. But when we love places, just like when we love people, we can't pick this and throw away that; if we're going to love them, we love the whole package. And that's how I love the South. Unashamedly, with a grin on my face and a half-eaten peach in my hand.

So this book isn't anti-Yankee. In fact, wherever you live in America, and whenever your ancestors came to these shores, you'll probably find something of your family's story here. After all, we're the first generation that's had the luxury of researching our ancestry. We have leisure time and computers, we can travel, and we can share digital information with people we've never met. So it's only natural to wonder how our ancestors lived, including what they ate. Maybe, after reading this book, you'll want to dig out an old recipe, cook something your grandmother loved to cook, plant a garden, can some vegetables, or make some jelly. Hopefully, you'll embrace *Grits to Glory* with a smile, a tear, and maybe new fondness for the amazing beauty of the human race.

This is folk history, not the way historians tell it, but the way the people tell it. All the people in *Grits to Glory* are real, though unfortunately, some of their names are lost in the mist of history. After all, some of these dishes were made and taught and passed down for generations before ever being written for the first time. The recipes and stories in this volume were gathered through years of very tasty research. They come from books, old magazines, journals, and government archives. From tramping through woods and along riverbanks, and from sitting beside campfires with hunters and fishermen. From smelling the rich earth in gardens large and small, following an old man who followed a plow that followed a mule, and from filling homemade baskets with fresh green beans, squash, and corn. From yellowed and stained recipes written on butcher paper and tucked between the pages of hundred-year-old cookbooks. And from countless interviews, sitting on porches and at kitchen tables, watching cooks at work, and listening to them talk about their food and their people. Because in the South, we can't talk about our food without talking about our people. That's our history: the little stories that make up the big story of *Grits to Glory*.


GRITS
TO
GLORY

All across the South, families know they can make a delicious meal out of whatever happens to be on hand. (Courtesy of Library of Congress)

Chapter 1

Something from Nothing

It was 1866, only a year after the end of the Civil War. Hannah Higgins was a freed kitchen slave who, like many, stayed on after the war to work for her former owners, the Mason family of McDowell County, North Carolina. It was winter, the time of year when food was scarce, nothing was growing in the gardens, the food they'd stored back in the fall was dwindling, and wild game animals were sleeping away the cold months. Every winter was a struggle for poor rural families, and for several years it was desperately hard for everybody in the South. The marching troops, thundering horses, heavy wagons, and exploding shells had wiped out nearly every bit of livestock, crops, wild game, and wild-growing edibles for miles around. There was not a chicken or an egg on the Mason place. Hannah looked at the meager scraps in the pantry and wondered how she could pull them together into a meal that would feed everyone that evening.

About that time the oldest boy came walking up the road from town with a bundle under his arm, a package from Mrs. Mason's sister in Raleigh. She knew how hard it had been on the family farm, and had sent a few things to help. The kids gathered around, chattering in anticipation as Mrs. Mason reached into the box, and right there on top was a little white paper bag of gumdrop candy. Then she pulled out brown sugar, white sugar, flour, then peanuts and raisins.

Hannah was jumping for joy. "Now I know just what I can fix," she exclaimed, pouring a coffee cup full of the gumdrops and handing the bag back to Mrs. Mason. With a smile and a wink, she turned and gave the candy to the children, and they ran with it out the back door, squealing with the kind of joy that was rare in those difficult times. Hannah went to the root cellar and came back with a small basket of dried apples, then went to the pantry for a handful of walnuts and the cream of tartar, and then she pulled out her mixing bowl. She was working from memory, using an old recipe that called for butter, and she didn't have any butter, so she used lard. It called for sour milk, and she didn't have any milk, sweet or sour, so she added a little more lard. It called for eggs, but she didn't have any, so she had to leave them out.

The result was Hannah's Eggless Fruitcake. Everybody said it was the juiciest, tastiest fruitcake ever, and it was just the thing to boost the spirits of a family with a cupboard that was almost bare. In fact, in the wake of the war's destruction, it was one of many dishes created by resourceful cooks, who came up with dishes like "Kentucky One-Egg Cake," and the even more austere Eggless, Milkless, Butterless Cake.

But how did Hannah get to be so resourceful? Why was she still cooking for the white family that had once owned her, along

Sometimes the question of what to serve was answered by looking in the cupboard. This Arkansas root cellar, with its white-washed walls, serves as a pantry for familiar modern brands alongside home-canned goods, much as it did 110 years ago.

with her husband and children? At one time the Masons planted big, green fields and kept barns, sheds, and cellars full of delicious foods all year 'round, so how did they fall so low that they struggled to feed themselves?

First, Southerners had to get to a pinnacle that was high enough they could fall. And that's a story that started more than 200 years before, in the early 1600s, with shiploads of people landing on rocky shores while Indians watched, thought about killing every one of them, but then decided to wait and see where it all led. The Natives watched the pasty-faced foreigners plant some traditional European crops, leading up to a harvest that turned out to be no harvest at all. And when they were on the brink of starvation, the Indians fed them. So our nation was literally born in hospitality and shared food. That's an off-handed, gross simplification of what happened, and the traditional image of starched pilgrims sharing a big meal with Indians around a big harvest table is mostly fiction. There were plenty of Indian hostilities, and plenty of attacks on Indians by hateful, racist, land-grabbing European immigrants. But people have always celebrated the harvest, usually accompanied by some form of expressing gratitude. And the history of America's pre-Colonial period is laced with anecdotes of peaceful meetings of Indians and European immigrants based around food. The Indians really did introduce the immigrants to corn and other crops, and really did help them learn to feed themselves in the New World.

Flash forward to the Donner Party, famous American cannibals, stranded in the hard winter snows of 1847, and starving until

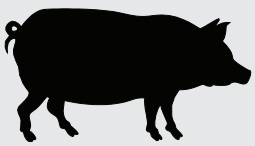
they sat down to a tasty meal of their best friends' hind quarters. All the while they were surrounded by Indians whose ancestors had lived through such snowy winters for centuries, and never once took a bite of a neighbor. The Donner bunch would have never made it in the South following the Civil War. They'd have whined, worried, and complained, while they chewed the last bit of Uncle Mike-jerky. Fortunately for the South, early Southerners were a line of Americans born in need, raised on charity, and nourished by hope. No matter what their circumstances, no matter what tragedies fell around their shoulders, they celebrated life, and could always find a way to live it to the fullest.

In the South, we still love old hymns that teach us to sing about our misery. We love the long, dusty, country road that's uphill both ways and never gives us rest. We love the foreboding swamps, where everything wants to kill us. The angry winter wind in our face, when we have nothing to wear but threadbare shirts. And the relentless sun that peels our skin while we toil at chores that are never done. Nobody suffers better than Southerners.

So while Hannah made her fruitcake, people were in the fields cooking corn cakes on the blades of their garden hoes. Women were scraping the last threads of meat from hog heads to make soup. Men who couldn't afford ammunition for their guns went out and caught turtles with their bare hands, and their children brought home baskets of berries and nuts. The kinfolks went over to Will Lewis's farm after services at Concord Baptist Church, in the Little Dixie region of Missouri. He'd get a big watermelon out of the patch, and they'd all enjoy a slice, letting the sweet, pink juice run down their fingers. Little Jaunita Maude Lewis walked to school every day with an egg sandwich in her lunch bucket. Then after the first frost, she didn't bother making a sandwich, but took the bucket anyway, and walked the long way through the woods, where she filled the bucket with sweet, orange persimmons. Then at lunch time she'd eat a few and trade the rest for somebody else's egg sandwich.

All across the South, families could sit down at a table of tasteless, leftover scraps, bow their heads, and say how grateful they were to have such good things to eat. For them it was never a question of how little they had. The question was only how they could make a fine meal, creating something from nothing. They lived that way knowing the Lord and the land would somehow give them everything they needed. They honestly believed that when things were at their worst, they were always going to get better.

Those families that were so poor after the Civil War raised up another generation who knew how to make a life for themselves. The Mason kids of McDowell County must have been forever shaped by seeing Hannah make



PORCH TALK

Nowadays, people joke that they pass fruitcakes around from family to family, re-gifting the same one every Christmas because it never spoils, and besides, they say, nobody likes fruitcake anyway. But fruitcake was once a Southern staple, partly because it could be made in so many varieties. It was essentially a moist cake with some combination—almost any combination—of fruit, nuts, and candy baked in. Usually, whiskey was cooked in, or poured over it, or both, which kept it fresh and moist. In a time when vegetables were hard to keep, and meat was hard to get, a fruitcake could be a meal in itself.

a memorable fruitcake on the day they didn't have enough in the pantry for a single good meal. When children of that generation grew up and married, they enjoyed a family garden, a few head of livestock, and fields that yielded two crops a year, so they could feed themselves and still have something to sell at the market down the road. They used their mothers' recipes and improved the ingredients. Then their children were able to go to the store and stock their pantries with familiar, consistent brands, and measure them more precisely every time they cooked. Then the next generation of children grew up, still cooking the same favorite dishes, still working from the same recipes, and Southern Cookin' just got better and better.

For decades, Southerners had to adapt to the changing availability of food, including times when there was hardly any. And people who are adaptable in one aspect of life tend to be adaptable in other aspects. They're survivors and optimists. Where others see problems, they see possibilities. So it was that Southern cooks formed a kaleidoscopic relationship with their ingredients and processes, with a deeply intuitive understanding of what it takes to make a delicious meal out of what's on hand. They worked with a palette of traditionally Southern ingredients, from bacon grease to okra, and traditionally Southern recipes, from stuffed and roasted pork tenderloin to pecan pie, always adapting to what was available. Like everything else in a Southerner's life, the meal on the table may not be perfect, but it's ours. We may not have everything we want, but we've got this. We'll make it delicious and while we're doing it we'll tell old stories, make new ones, and have a good time doing it.