

Southern Gastronomical Unity

We'll Rally Round the Grits

by William Murchison



Why don't y'all try to guess—go ahead—which American region, in its unofficial anthem, celebrates food. Answer? The South. Permit me, Suh:

Dar's buckwheat cakes and Injun batter,
Makes you fat or a little fatter,
Look away! Look away! Look away! Dixieland.

You see? We have been in the eating business a long time down here, and even if the author of the song in question, one Daniel D. Emmett, was a damyankee, he was not a totally unenlightened one. He sensed somehow or other what mattered in Dixieland. Food mattered then and matters now. All kinds of food, from buckwheat cakes to black-eyed peas, with stops along the way for ham hocks, cream gravy, collard greens, oysters, field corn, jambalaya, fried chicken, catfish, barbecue, pot liquor, hot buttered biscuits, rice, Tabasco sauce, spareribs, hush puppies, and she-crab soup. To imagine even a celestial portion of it is to fill the nostrils with imaginary aromas and the eyes with genuine tears. Eat away! Eat away!

Living anywhere south of the Mason-Dixon Line means eating particular things particularly well. At least that was our universal experience up to the advent of imports like the Big Mac and take-out Szechwan noodles. Even these distinctly non-Dixie products we have, to some extent, blended into our rituals. Southerners are famously adaptive. We have gone so far, if you please, as to appropriate Sautéed Escargot and Duck in Toasted Garlic Red Wine Sauce with Butternut Squash, Brie Tart, and Tarragon Horseradish Drizzle.

William Murchison is distinguished professor of journalism at Baylor University and a columnist for Creators Syndicate.

But I was speaking of ritual. Food is ritual everywhere, no doubt, in some sense or another. Southerners are not the sole proprietors. But oh, how we relish it at our table. (Observe the sly, typically Southern insertion of a food trope—"relish"—in this context.)

Ritual is the Way Things Are Done. It is a conservative instinct. We do things in a certain way because that is the way we do things—always making room for marginal improvements, à la Edmund Burke. There is piety in this manner of leading life. Piety is a Southern speciality, like grits. It would have been unnatural had feelings of reverence been chased out of the kitchen with a large rolling pin. They never were.

It started with the cultural setting, though Southerners would hardly have spoken in such a high-toned-sociology-seminar sort of way. Food in the South is/was for the gathered—the nuclear family first of all, then the cousins and aunts, then the "club," then—well, you take it from there, wide as you care to set the markers.

Edna Lewis, the cookbook author and specialist in Southern cooking, writes of food as the "bond" of her onetime rural and black community in Virginia—"gathering wild strawberries, canning, rendering lard, finding walnuts, picking persimmons, making fruitcake." It was what the people of Freetown did together.

Another small example: the ritual, practiced in my wife's family a few decades ago, of the Day After Christmas Gumbo. This dish was produced by a relatively tight circle in a large extended family in Galveston: German and Creole predominantly, by way of southern Louisiana and like exotic venues. Into an immense blue-and-white Graniteware pot, somewhere around midday, went pretty much everything left over from Christmas dinner, along with appropriate seasonings. Membership cre-

dentials in the select society of December 26 gumbo chefs were a puzzle—a matter for family speculation. A member seemed to recognize himself and the other members as well. Here again was pure, practically unspoken ritual. I might add that the ritual, duly modified, goes on. My wife procured the celebrated gumbo pot some years after death decimated the December 26 society. We use it to make our own Christmastime gumbo (albeit not on December 26). When not employing this honorable piece of equipment, we display it prominently on a kitchen shelf.

Another kind of ritual used to be performed diligently throughout the South in early and late summer, from countless kitchen or porch chairs, generally in a soft summer twilight, with crickets chirping and the first faint, cool breeze starting up. This was the ritual of the black-eyed pea shelling. Or it might be cream peas, no matter. The ultimate objective was, in due course, to gobble down the peas, boiled in bacon fat and onions. But there was a more immediate objective: conversation. A black-eyed-pea-shelling circle, so to speak, made up of about three, was ideal. There was never any shortage of family or community news—we called it news, not gossip—to dispense and digest. I cannot recall politics or religion intruding much on these refreshing occasions, unless the governor or the local Methodist pastor had exhibited notable dimness of wit. But many an errant uncle or cousin was put soundly in his place. A good black-eyed-pea shelling could take an hour, depending on the number of hands and pea pods. It could take longer. If you were going to do it at all, you might as well shell some extras for the Kraft Mayonnaise jar.

This particular ritual, I am sad to say, has ceased, done in by the high-speed pea-sheller. We now buy our peas shelled and ready to throw into the pot. What this chiefly means is that the “news” awaits the dinner hour.

Some amplification of the subject of black-eyed peas seems in order. Many would call grits the distinctive gastronomic product of the Southland: a continuing bafflement to the Northern folk as these hominy dried grains slide down the breakfast plate, right into the bacon. Grits are good. Shoot, grits can be wonderful. I hold out all the same for the black-eyed pea as our fundamental contribution to gastronomy. The great James Jackson Kilpatrick, late of the *Richmond News-Leader*, seconds the motion. Kilpo is given to celebrating the black-eye with resonance and wit, going so far as to elect himself Number One Pea, Pro Tempore, of the Black-Eyed Pea Society of America. “It is impossible sufficiently to laud the Noble Legume,” he wrote once in a moment of uncharacteristic restraint on the subject.

Black-eyes go agreeably with every dish known to man. Moreover, the going lasts through the entirety of summer, when peas start to arrive fresh from the fields. There is a kind of blessed assurance in the knowledge that, whatever may befall a Southerner during July and August, the black-eyed pea will be available to console and refresh.

It goes beyond that. In Texas, and likely other places as well, we single out Kilpo’s Noble Legume every New Year’s Day, when the eating of at least a token portion—for good luck, as we say—becomes a savory duty: a duty performed all the more pleasantly with a side of ham and a spoonful of redeye gravy. This duty I still enforce on our household, even after discovering that the New Year’s black-eyed pea ritual began only during the Depression—I had imagined Adam and Eve had some-

thing to do with it—as a strategy for the promotion of black-eyed peas. Let that go. What would a Southerner wish to promote in place of the black-eyed pea? The Hoagie?

That is enough (for now, anyway) about black-eyes. Back to the larger matter—how Southerners eat.

A particular characteristic of old-fashioned Southern cuisine was heft—sheer bulk. Our food lay long and languorously on the stomach after the midday meal formerly called “dinner,” now known as “lunch.” Long before obesity became the newest fixation of the professional reformers, Southerners woofed down meals that would send any self-respecting fitness expert into a swoon. As Ben Robertson related in *Red Hills and Cotton*,

We had red gravy in bowls and wide platters filled with thick slices of ham, smoked and cured and fried, and we had fried eggs right from the nests . . . At my grandfather’s house at noontime we had soup and two or three kinds of meat, fried chicken, fried ham, or spareribs or liver pudding; and we had four or five vegetables and a dessert or so and fruit.

Food of this character (leaving aside buckwheat cakes and Injun batter) rarely went to fat. The Southerner worked or walked it off. You never met fat—pardon me, generously proportioned—Southerners with the frequency you encountered Upper Midwesterners of more than ordinary girth. Food, however mouth-watering, was fuel first of all—except, of course, in Louisiana, where it early on attained religious status.

In a way, old-style eating amounted to playing catch-up ball. There had plainly been times when food in the South was hard to come by, despite the land’s natural bounty. Humanitarians like General Sherman had taken care of that. More than one generation of Southerners in the 30’s licked dry lips as Scarlett O’Hara uprooted and crunched down the turnip in Tara’s back garden. “As God is my witness,” Katie Scarlett vowed, “I’ll never be hungry again.” Ben Robertson would write: “My grandparents never forgot Lee’s surrender and the days of starvation in the South, and neither of them ever allowed any of us at their house to waste rations. ‘You can eat whatever you like and as much as you like,’ my grandmother told us, ‘but what you take on your plate you must finish.’” The Depression fortified this commonsensible view of life, which I myself heard propounded as late as the 1950’s.

The South is a broad and varied land. Needless to say, experiences, memories, and gastronomic tastes have always varied to some degree. Texans love chili, but I would not give long odds on finding a decent “bowl of red” in Atlanta. Likely as not, if you did chance upon such a dish there, the wretch of a cook would have mingled good meat with pinto beans. (I pause to let the horrific thought sink in.)

Texans slice their barbecue off dead cows, North Carolinians, off dead pigs. Nobody but nobody excels Louisianans in the preparation of gumbo. As I have already noted, food is religion in Louisiana—thanks, no doubt, to the French influence. A New Orleans restaurant like Galatoire’s or Commander’s Palace is a temple; its chefs are the high priests. Notwithstanding that Texas lies cheek to jowl with Louisiana, and that Texans love to eat, you rarely find in the Lone Star State comparable devotion to food as fine art.

For all that, the essential cultural unity of the South (a unity that transcends mere race) has provided some gastronomic uni-

ty. Grits might be less likely to turn up on breakfast plates in Texas than in Virginia, but Southerners in general appreciate the general idea of grits and rejoice to find them offered at Sunday buffets, preferably drenched in cheese. Everyone, it should suffice to say, loves barbecue with smelly onions.

All the same, I must issue a few words of caution and admonition. The gastronomic unity of which I speak is not what it used to be. All right, *nothing* is what it used to be. But I have watched the South change mightily in recent decades, along with the rest of the country. We must own up: Not even the black-eyed pea—sniff, sniff—enjoys the profound allegiance it formerly commanded.

Several changes must be noted. One is the decline of the family meal across America. We Southerners are not alone in this. The family meal—to cite just one of its achievements—focused the family's attention on the same cuisine. All ate the same thing at the same time. Not anymore, or, at any rate, not to the same extent. Too many extraneous preoccupations compete with the communal sharing of grits and peas.

Too many new foods compete likewise with grits and peas, and with ham and catfish and collard greens. Americans are caught up as never before in the Pleasures of the Table. This is partly because never before have so many pleasures been so widely available at generally affordable prices. What is new and maybe also exotic turns out to be the very thing we want tonight: come to think of it, for lunch. Much of the new food is of the "fast" variety—Domino's, Little Caesar's, Jack in the Box, Taco Bueno. Such are the lives we lead. It takes hours to cook a ham. A trip to Subway gets you ham on a sandwich bun, with dressing, provolone, and sliced onions. Not bad. But not Southern. Sigh.

More—I hope to be forgiven for putting it thus—respectable and proper cuisines also vie for our attention. Oriental is here in a big way. Vietnamese restaurants, in particular, are all over the place; so also Thai. Indian establishments serve up not fried but Tandoori chicken. Within all these various places of business, it seems safe to infer, not a single proprietor or chef or waiter or maitre d' has ever voluntarily boiled a pot of grits. Certainly, no one would think of offering them on the menu. The possibilities for going through Southern life gritless seem to expand and enlarge almost daily.

Since the 60's, a large number of the Northern brothers and Sisters have taken up residence in our midst, further diluting our established culinary commitments. The bagel has taken us by storm. You can slather practically anything atop it. Calories are minimal. The current Greater Dallas Yellow Pages lists no fewer than 33 bagel outlets. Nor is this counting supermarkets—virtually all of which bake their own bagels or import the chain-store varieties. What would Jeb Stuart make of the bagel? What would Thomas Nelson Page? It probably does not do to wonder.

Slack must nevertheless be cut for a non-Southern cuisine that, in fact, is demonstrably—even historically—Southern. I speak of Mexican food. Mex—the Texan shorthand for this wonderful and simple cuisine—has been with us since the memory of man runneth not to the contrary. The Mexicans, as we Celts cheerfully acknowledge, got here first. Mexico's early-20th-century revolutions and civil wars precipitated more and more Mexicans into the regions north, east, and west of San Antonio. They brought with them their food, suitably adapted to place and time. Enchiladas, tacos, frijoles, guacamole, and

tostadas with salsa are a part of the environment in Texas—as fundamental to the good life as ever black-eyed peas were accounted. Tex demands his Mex several times a month. It has been confessed by some that a week without Mex is like Christmas with no bonus—bleakly unthinkable.

Mex entered the South-at-large only randomly and slowly, but it now turns up regularly from the Rio Grande to the Potomac. That is progress of a sort. Texans, when out of town, need their Mex. Hunting hard, I found it in Memphis 35 years ago. It was awful. Still, it was Mex. Same with the offerings at an out-of-the-way cafeteria in Palo Alto, California, almost 40 years ago. It, too, was awful. But it was Mex.

Texans are like that. We will defend in any gathering of Southern gourmands Mexican food's proper place in the gastronomic constellation. Whereby, perhaps, we make a key admission. Southern cuisine is that which Southerners eat. Which is to say, the commitment to eat a particular dish precedes the preparation.

What is prepared can change over time. *Has* changed, in my own longish lifetime as a Southerner. Will continue to change. Buckwheat cakes and Injun batter no longer (if they ever did) define the universe of Southern gastronomy.

Yet I think, in the main, we are adding, not subtracting; building on the past, not uprooting it. The kingdom of the black-eyed pea is shrinking, but at the Dallas farmers' market I find peas prominently displayed and hungrily sought after. Who we are now is a function of who we have been: consumers of what the Book of Common Prayer calls the "kindly fruits of the earth"—the Southern earth, in our own blessed case. If we are indeed what we eat, why, then, Suh, who would want ever to be anything but a loyal, well-fed, somewhat satiated son or daughter of the Southland?

c

The Leader: A Study in Steadiness

Richard Moore

Because he's free of wit and whim
and feels for you, you follow him.
He has no problems of his own;
or if he does, they're not well known.

With yours, thus freed, you sense him cope,
absolute as a gyroscope.
Who cares if he, with secret sinning
humming within, is madly spinning?