

Editor's Introduction

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In this issue we are pleased to present our second annual installment of papers, presentations and addresses from the Natchez Literary and Cinema Celebration, held each year in February. Founded in 1990 by Carolyn Vance Smith of Copiah-Lincoln Community College, and generously supported by a number of cultural and educational institutions in Mississippi, the Celebration explores a different theme each year; in 2006 it was food and drink in Southern history, literature and film.¹

As we assemble this past year's material into this special issue, I am struck by a recent offhand remark by a senior Congressman from New York that was widely reported here in Mississippi late this fall. U.S. Rep. Charles Rangel of Harlem, in his patented (and humorous) foot-in-mouth way, in considering changes in the new Congress from the recent elections, noted "Mississippi gets more than their fair share in federal money, but who the hell wants to live in Mississippi?"² And yet, as I write this in mid-December in southern Mississippi, temperatures reach into the upper 70s under clear blue skies, and in my garden sassanquas and camellias and newfangled azaleas are all in bloom, as is some mysterious flowering fragrant bush, even as the winter solstice and Christmas fast approach. By the time this issue appears, in February, spring will already have sprung here in the Gulf South.

It is true, of course, that Mississippi consistently ranks lowest on the 'good' lists and highest on the 'bad' lists: we will leave the list of Congressional pork for you, dear reader, to categorize. However, it is also true that Mississippi today evokes in the collective imagination the representation of "The South" *par excellence*, for good as well as ill. And there is one further list, the annual "Generosity Index" of the Catalogue for Philanthropy, released in November for the past ten years, that speaks volumes. Since 1995, Mississippians consistently have ranked number one in the percentage of income they contribute to charitable organizations.³ For all else, Mississippians (poor as they are relatively) are the country's "most generous" people, as are people in the South generally.

This generosity is often glossed as simply "southern hospitality," and indeed it can be. And they are both intimately bound up with food, the gift of the poor, rich in spirit. Just imagine all those church fellowship lunches and suppers and gatherings – the potluck and catfish and

barbeque fundraisers – the bake-sale goodies and sickbed soups – the welcome wagons and funeral food. The southern kitchen is one of the South’s greatest gifts and food one of the region’s greatest joys. New York may be a culinary cornucopia, a kitchen of the wide world, including some fine down-home southern food (and I bet that Congressman Rangel has a welcome table at the famous soul-food Sylvia’s Restaurant on Malcolm X Boulevard), but throughout the South every little town has its own Sylvia’s.

This special issue is a veritable banquet (though not an all-you-can-eat buffet, mind you, that’s next door, and watch your elbows) on the many-layered meanings of food in southern history, literature and film. It is a five-course meal, prix fixe, no corkage fee, smoking lounge at the bar.

As the historian John Egerton notes, “there’s more to our food than just the food.” Throughout the region, southern foodways, including procurement and ingredients, preparation and presentation, and consumption (culturally as well as physically), mingle many traditions. The culinary historian Jessica B. Harris reminds us of the “magic of three”; the “intricate braiding” of Native American, European, and African food traditions, with origins in the colonial era. Robert L. Hall, in a wide-ranging essay, cooks up a major work of synthesis on the historical African influences, and in comprehensive detail, including sub-regional connections and culinary styles on both sides of the Atlantic. This is African diaspora history at its best – the meat on the bones.

The Tennessee Williams scholar, W. Kenneth Holditch, sifts his plays for food and drink and their manifold meanings, while Judy Hood dips the work of another southern iconoclast, the inimitable Zora Neale Hurston, into the “cultural gumbo” of her literary kitchen. Savory indeed. For “sides” we offer cookbooks: John T. Edge on that pop-cultural artifact *White Trash Cooking* (1986); and Gerald Patout on resources of The Historic New Orleans Collection, a gem of a private research archive and museum in the Crescent City. And what is a proper supper without “sweets” and “sippages”? The restaurateur and writer Robert St. John regales us with his stories, and the good cheer continues with a little bourbon, neat. But let us remember that there are new traditions, that in fact, to be “traditional” things must needs change. Who would guess that *hot tamales* would become a folk-cultural food in the Mississippi Delta? But this has been the case since at least the 1930s, when the iconic and ill-fated bluesman Robert Johnson, of crossroads fame, sang of

Hot tamales and they red hot
 yes, she got ‘em for sale
 Hot tamales and they red hot
 yes, she got ‘em for sale
 I got a girl, say she long and tall
 She sleeps in the kitchen with feets in the hall
 Hot tamales and they red hot
 yes, she got ‘em for sale, I mean
 Yes, she got ‘em for sale, yeah.⁴

Food as metaphor, indeed. The Faulkner scholar (and former editor of *The Southern Quarterly*), Noel Polk, meditates on his native state in his remarkable acceptance address for the 2006 Richard Wright Award. In a public *tour de force*, he confesses, “in this magnificent state, this awful state, where it is perpetually the best of times and the worst of times, I’m damn tired, *bone tired*, of having to love Mississippi *despite*; I want for my last years on this earth to be able to love it *because*.”

It is food that salves the conscience as it fills the belly, and yet a gourmand can tilt to gluttony, one of the seven deadly sins. The South has its sins, lord knows, and Mississippi perhaps more than its fair share of that too. It is this tension, this love-hate relationship, this *need* in a still-needy place in time, that we seek to feed. Enjoy. Let me close with another Robert Johnson blues lyric, his “Come On In My Kitchen” (1936):

I went to the mountain
 far as my eyes could see
 Some other man got my woman
 lonesome blues got me
 But she better come on
 in my kitchen
 ‘cause it’s goin’ to be rainin’ outdoors

My mama dead
 papa well’s to be⁵
 Ain’t got nobody
 To love and care for me
 She better come on
 In this kitchen
 ‘cause it’s goin’ to be rainin’ outdoors

NOTES

¹ “Biscuits, Gumbo, Sweet Tea, and Bourbon Balls: Southern Food and Drink in History, Literature, and Film,” The 17th Annual Natchez Literary and Cinema Celebration, 23-26 February 2006, Natchez, Mississippi. The 18th Annual Celebration on “Southern Accents: Language in the Deep South,” will be held 22-25 February 2007.

² Quoted in the *New York Times*, and reported in the *Sun Herald* (Biloxi, Miss.), 10 Nov. 2006.

³ Much of this statistical generosity comes from church tithing, but with other charitable giving included Mississippians on average donate over 10 percent of their annual income to philanthropy, and have done so consistently since at least the mid-1990s. See the Generosity Index 2006 report (14 Nov. 2006) online at http://www.catalogueforphilanthropy.org/cfp/generosity_index/.

⁴ The song, recorded in San Antonio, Texas, on 27 November 1936, is one of the total of 29 songs that Robert Johnson (1911-1938) of Hazlehurst, Mississippi, recorded during his short but legendary blues career; [Peter Guralnick], Liner Notes accompanying *Robert Johnson, The Complete Recordings*, 2 Compact Discs (Columbia/CBS Records, Inc., 1990). The lyrics of “They’re Red Hot” are on pp.32-33.

⁵ A common dialectic contraction meaning “had just as well be.”