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ARKANSAUCE

The Journal of Arkansas Foodways

Issue 1, 2011



Premier Issue

ARKANSAUCE

Arkansauce: The Journal of Arkansas Foodways is published by the **Special Collections Department of the University of Arkansas Libraries**.

The mission of the Special Collections Department is to collect, organize, preserve, and provide access to research materials documenting the state of Arkansas and its role in regional, national, and international communities.

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On the Cover: Improved food preservation methods resulted in many well-stocked pantries. Photograph from "A History of the Agricultural Extension Service in Arkansas," by Mena Hogan (Thesis, M.S. University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1942), page 44.

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Welcome to *Arkansauce*!

By Tom Dillard

Arkansans love their food. We enjoy eating and drinking—not to mention the visiting that goes on during any relaxed meal. Our state is diverse enough to offer an array of dining opportunities—and with each passing year, more and more restaurants and cafés become available. Not only are Arkansans world-class eaters, we like to dwell on other aspects of dining—talking about our favorite foods, seeking out sources for Arkansas Black apples, exchanging recipes, trying to grow the perfect tomato, and passing on our family food traditions to our children. Just today, I had an earnest discussion with a friend about Grapette, that extraordinary soft drink from Camden, Arkansas, which in recent years has been brought back on the market.

All of this is to say that Arkansas offers a fertile field for inquiry into food—its history, traditions, folklore, and its current culinary scene, too. I hope *Arkansauce* will serve to focus that inquiry. This new magazine offers an opportunity for us to shed light upon this remarkably diverse and interesting topic.

We are grateful to **Mr. and Mrs. John G. Ragsdale** of Little Rock for making this new journal a reality. Mr. Ragsdale, who is author of a number of books on outdoor cooking, has long had an interest in American food history. We appreciate the generosity of John G. and DeDe.

We are also grateful to the guest editor of this inaugural issue of *Arkansauce*, **Rex Nelson** of Little Rock. Rex is perhaps Arkansas's premier "foodie." He writes a popular blog on Southern foodways at <http://RexNelsonSouthernFried.com>, which offers "ruminations on barbecue, politicking, football, frog gigging, trotlining, blues playing, horseracing, boxing, bird hunting, movie watching, crappie eating and other major issues of the day."

If you enjoy this new journal, it will be due to a large extent to the hard work of our special projects

*"Arkansas offers a fertile field for inquiry into food—its history, traditions, folklore, and its current culinary scene, too. I hope *Arkansauce* will serve to focus that inquiry."*

librarian, **Dr. Diane Worrell**. Diane serves as managing editor of *Arkansauce*, and she has worked closely with Rex to insure that our journal is something in which we can take pride. **Timothy G. Nutt**, assistant head of Special Collections and our manuscripts and rare books librarian, was also instrumental in making the journal a reality. Tim, who is an awfully creative guy, came up with the name *Arkansauce*.

Due to cost, we are launching *Arkansauce* as a yearly journal, but we hope to increase the frequency of publication to twice yearly. While we are distributing it free of charge, we would appreciate any financial assistance readers can provide. Gifts to Special Collections are tax-deductible as provided by law.

Soon we will begin seeking topics and writers for the next issue. We welcome your thoughts and suggestions. Also, we are asking our readers to send us menus from favorite restaurants. We are likewise continuing to build our collection of Arkansas cookbooks, and we would appreciate hearing from you if you have menus or cookbooks to donate.

In addition to making you hungry, we hope *Arkansauce* will provide good reading. Please pass along this copy to others who might be interested. And, good eating!

Defining Arkansas Cuisine

By Rex Nelson, Guest Editor



If you were to perform a Google search for “Arkansas cuisine,” you would come up with a mixed bag of results. That’s probably to be expected in a state that’s mostly Southern but also a bit Midwestern and a bit Southwestern. Frankly, it’s tough to define a distinctive Arkansas cuisine.

John T. Edge, who heads the Southern Foodways Alliance at the University of Mississippi, has written that he likes people “for whom food is a caloric fuel, sure, but also a means of cultural expression, on par with music and literature.” There’s a reason Edge has a lot of friends in Arkansas. Though we don’t brag, we take our food seriously. I’m among those who believe there’s no greater expression of the Arkansas culture than our food. On a recent Sunday night, I sat with friends in the back room of Gene’s Barbecue at Brinkley, eating fried squirrel and fried crappie at Gene DePriest’s weekly invitation-only wild game dinner. It

was one of the finest meals I’ve ever had, an event that met the definition of what it means to be an Arkansan.

So what is Arkansas cuisine?

Here’s my best shot at a short definition: traditional country cooking done simply and done well, using the freshest, locally sourced ingredients possible.

Growing up in this state, I was fortunate in so many ways when it came to enjoying food. For starters, I’ve always loved to eat. I’m reminded of the family friend who would have the same answer whenever my mother would ask if his son wanted something to eat: “He’s breathing, ain’t he?”

I’m also fortunate that all four of my grandparents lived into their 90s. I spent a lot of time with them through the years. One set of grandparents lived in Des Arc. The other set lived in Benton. In both places, there were gardens, chicken yards and fruit trees. Both grandmothers were superb cooks.

Late March and early April meant it was time for a vinegar and bacon grease soaked salad with fresh leaf lettuce and radishes. That salad always tasted like an Arkansas spring to me. While spending summer days in Benton or Des Arc, I would go out early in the morning to gather fresh eggs and vegetables from the gardens. I have vivid memories of picking okra, cucumbers, purple-hull peas, corn, and pole beans with my grandmother in Benton and my grandfather in Des Arc.

I’m also fortunate to have grown up eating food cooked by Mrs. Lucille Balch. We weren’t a

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wealthy family, but because my mother worked as the business manager for my father’s sporting goods store, we did have a maid at home. In this more enlightened time, I realize I should have referred to her as Mrs. Balch. But in 1960s and 1970s Arkansas, our African American maid was simply Lucille to me. In my mind, she was another member of the family. She helped raise me, for goodness sakes. I loved her, and I loved her cooking—her fried chicken, chicken and dumplings, fried apples, eggplant dishes, fresh summer squash, and onions.

During the summer, our “dinner” was in the old Southern tradition—at 1:00 p.m. My parents came home from work to eat the huge meal Lucille had cooked. My father often



Rex Nelson, guest editor, reflecting on one of his favorite pastimes—dining, photograph by Michael Juliano

took a short nap on the couch before heading back downtown. The evening meal was “supper.” It was more simple. But there were few things I liked better in the evening than peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, the cold fried chicken left over from earlier in the day, and a glass of milk. Sometimes, a fresh cantaloupe would serve as dessert. Like I said, I was fortunate.

You often hear people ask, “What would you choose for your last meal?”

I’ll equivocate a bit and give you several answers. If it’s around Thanksgiving or Christmas, make it Arkansas wild duck and cornbread dressing. In January and February, make it fried quail, rice and gravy, biscuits, and strawberry preserves. If it’s in the spring, summer, or early fall, the choice will be fried crap-
pie, fried potatoes, sliced tomatoes, cucumbers, and green onions fresh from the garden. Throw in some dewberry cobbler for dessert.

When Wayne Shadden, a famed barbecue cook from the Arkansas Delta, died in May 2010, his obituary in *The Daily World* of Helena said a lot in a few words about this state. It read: “Wayne was a good cook and well-known for his barbecue. He was a Navy veteran, and a member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the American Legion.” Well-known for barbecue? Wayne Shadden was far more than that. For true barbecue

aficionados, he was one of the masters. People would hear about Shadden’s tiny grocery store on U.S. Highway 49 near Marvell and drive from miles around to try his cooking. If you ate in the store, there was a single table in the back, which you could share with those who were on their own barbecue pilgrimages.

The understated style of Wayne Shadden’s obituary perfectly reflects the understated approach of Arkansans to our state’s cuisine.

Unlike our boastful Texas neighbors, we quietly prepare great barbecue and other foods, enjoy eating it, and then move on with our lives.

Because the natives don’t brag, Arkansas food has never received the national recognition it deserves. In addition to the modesty of the natives, a reason for the lack of national recognition might be that people from outside the state have a hard time figuring Arkansas out. As earlier mentioned, this is a fringe state, not solely a part of any one region. Northwest Arkansas is far different from Southeast Arkansas; Northeast

“So what is Arkansas cuisine? Here’s my best shot at a short definition: traditional country cooking done simply and done well, using the freshest, locally sourced ingredients possible.”

Arkansas isn’t like Southwest Arkansas.

The thing all parts of Arkansas have in common is that her people, while never boastful, are proud. After Hurricane Katrina destroyed many of the holdings of the Southern Food and Beverage Museum in New Orleans, the museum put out a call across the South for cookbooks. Almost 30 boxes of community cookbooks arrived from Arkansas, more than from any other state.

So what if outsiders can’t figure us out? Those of us in Arkansas already know we have a good thing going when it comes to food. Yes, we’re a state of contradictions that confounds those from elsewhere.

Define Arkansas food, you say? It’s no easy task. Most Arkansans will tell you to just shut up and eat.

Guest editor Rex Nelson is President of Arkansas’ Independent Colleges and Universities and a columnist for the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette. He often writes about Arkansas cuisine on his blog, Rex Nelson’s Southern Fried, which can be found at: <http://www.rexnelsonsouthernfried.com>.

Foods at Our House During the Great Depression

By John G. Ragsdale

Editor's note: John G. and Dora J. "DeDe" Ragsdale, *Arkansauce's* benefactors, are fans of Arkansas history and connoisseurs of Dutch oven and camp cooking. A retired petroleum engineer from El Dorado, Mr. Ragsdale first became interested in Dutch oven cooking during his years as a Boy Scout leader. He published his first book, *Dutch Oven Cooking*, in 1973. His other books include *Camper's Guide to Outdoor Cooking: Everything from Fires to Fixin's* (1998), *Camper's Guide to Outdoor Cooking: Tips, Techniques, and Delicious Eats* (1989), and *Dutch Ovens Chronicled: Their Use in the United States* (1991). Mr. Ragsdale also authored *Shuler Field, Arkansas: A Historical Summary of Fifty Years of Oil Production, 1937-1987* (1987) and *As We Were in South Arkansas* (1994). Mr. Ragsdale's partner in life and in gastronomy, wife DeDe, is a retired English teacher. They live in Little Rock. Mr. Ragsdale dictated this reminiscence of the foods he ate as a child.

Our family income during the 1930s was limited, but I have memories of delicious and ample foods, all prepared at home. We rarely ate a meal at a restaurant. My father, J.G. Ragsdale, was a lawyer in El Dorado, the seat of Union County. His office was always within a block of the county court house. All food purchases, planning, and preparation were left to my mother.

Many times my father knew his clients would not be able to pay. His philosophy was to perform the legal services for his clients and hope they would eventually be able to pay him. Clients who could not pay often brought us food and gifts in kind. This might be squirrels, ducks, a bushel of turnip greens, or some other garden produce. My favorite was pan-fried squirrel, cooked nice and tender.

Truck farmers who came to our neighborhood to sell their produce usually knocked on our wooden front porch to announce their presence. Good manners in rural areas meant treating the front porch as private space, so people did not go di-

rectly to the front door. This gave the resident, usually the housewife, time to see and know who was knocking at the porch. We purchased much fresh produce, such as garden tomatoes, beans and peas, corn on the cob, turnips or turnip greens, and spinach. Mother often cooked spinach and served it with hard-boiled eggs on top. We also had seasonal fruits, such as strawberries, peaches, watermelons, and cantaloupes.

A big pot of dried beans fed our family for several meals. My favorite was navy beans, and it still is today. We also ate a lot of corn bread. Usually mother preferred white corn meal over yellow. One of my aunts maintained that white cornmeal was for humans, and yellow was for the animals. Our cornbread was usually cooked in cast iron pans, either as muffins or long sticks. One of mother's favorite breads was yeast rolls, and we ate a lot of them through the years.

Our breakfast menu generally consisted of cereal with milk and sugar. Sometimes we had biscuits. Often we had fried or scrambled eggs, usually with bacon. In winter we ate oatmeal, and I still eat it to-

day. When we were in elementary school, we walked about four blocks home for lunch. Mama would usually serve us a bowl of soup and some kind of vegetable. As an after-school snack, mother usually had lemons or limes. We could come home from school and mix them with sugar and water to make our own lemonade or limeade. She also had some kind of sandwich spread so we could make our own snack after school. Some of the sandwich spread wasn't the healthiest, but that was what we had at the time.

Dad had some farm acreage on the west side of town. There were a number of friends and kin people in the area, and sometimes in the fall we would go halves with someone in butchering a hog. Our half would be paid for by Dad's financial contribution or by providing feed for the animal. After the animal was butchered we would have roasts, pork chops, and ground pork for weeks. My favorite was the steamed backbone. The meat on the backbone was very tender, and you could eat the marrow. One year Dad decided to share a portion of beef to be butchered. During the Depression the local cannery canned beef, and we ate a lot of it that winter. It was stringy and criticized by all of us and, as far as I remember, we didn't repeat buying and canning beef again.

Mother also made a lot of casseroles and dishes baked in the oven, such as macaroni and cheese or grits with butter. Sometimes she would steam a pot of rice and serve it with sugar and cream, or prepare scalloped potatoes, one of our favorite dishes. During the early growth season of the year we would have a lot of fresh produce, such as lima beans, purple hull peas, black eyed



John G. Ragsdale with his father, 1925

peas, or lady peas. Often the local farmers came by the neighborhood selling their products, or we bought produce at the curb market downtown on certain days of the week. I dreaded when Mama bought a bushel of beans or peas, because I knew I would have to shell them. One of mother's favorites was Kentucky Wonder string beans. They had strings on both sides of the pod, and after you strung the ends you still had strings in the middle.

We ate sweet potatoes. Mother preferred boiling and mashing them, then baking them in a casserole with marshmallows on top. My preference was a baked sweet potato which

was peeled and topped with some butter and a small amount of brown sugar. We also had a lot of baked white potatoes, which we scooped from the shell and ate with a little butter.

Mother liked to make layered cakes for dessert. She made either two or three layers, but the difficult part was making the icing. She was fond of seven minute icing, and I was the one who had to stand near the stove and stir it with a hand mixer. The seven minute icing included egg whites, sugar, and flavoring. I often thought it should be called 27 minute icing, because it took so long to get it ready. My reluctant labor might have been part of the problem for that. We did have a lot of eggs available. Mother

often saved the egg whites for icing, and the yolks would be used for egg custard. We would have very thick egg custard. The seven minute icing mother made could be adapted to work with one of her favorites, coconut cake. We peeled the inner membrane off the coconut and grated the meat with a hand grater. I was the one who usually did the grating. I had to be careful not to grate the edge of my fingers while working on the coconut.

I was my mother's kitchen wench. If Mama needed paper cut for the pans or something rubbed, I was the one who assisted. In serving cakes, Mother was very precise. She could cut them into sixteen pieces.

The cake was cut into four quarters, and each one of them could be used for four servings—so you could get sixteen servings out of a cake. We were not supposed to vary from that. Of course Dad wouldn't pay attention. He would come in late in the day and cut an extra piece, or worse, cut the cake crooked, which brought criticism from Mother. We ate a lot of layered cakes.

One of my Saturday jobs was to take a pound of white oleomargarine out of the refrigerator and let it get to room temperature so we could mix it with coloring. In those days we mixed yellow coloring into white margarine; then we had a butter substitute. In the 1930s there were laws forbidding the sale of colored oleomargarine, which was good for the dairy business.

Often we attended dinners on the ground at the Midway Baptist Church west of town. My great-grandfather, my grandfather, and my father had all been members of that church, which is still in existence. So many times we visited there on Sundays when they had a special speaker or program, and sometimes they would have dinner-on-the-ground after church. We younger boys would anxiously await the women laying out the food to be shared, and we would pick something we thought was interesting that we didn't normally have. We children had a smorgasbord of choices with these dinner-on-the-ground programs.

These are my recollections about the food we had during the 1930s. All of these foods were prepared at home; we rarely went out for a meal. We children didn't realize how tight money was, but we always ate well.

Beans, Beans, Beans!

The *Phaseolus Vulgaris* in Arkansas History

By Michael B. Dougan

Arkansas needs a state vegetable. Although virtually every state in the Union has a designated state vegetable, Arkansas passed a law in 1987 making the “South Arkansas Vine Ripe Pink Tomato” the official fruit and vegetable. Just how the fresh fruity tomato (hence not store-bought) got to be a vegetable goes back in history. The federal precedent for this act of scientific opacity dates to 1893 when the United States Supreme Court held in *Nix v. Hedden* that Congressmen were too dumb to know botany and meant their tariff bill to include tomatoes, even though the *Lycopersicon* (tomato) is a fruiting plant that produces berries. It was upon this embarrassingly ignorant premise, that law determines science, that the Arkansas legislature drafted the 1987 act.

Botanically the term “fruit” has an exact meaning that involves ovaries, not generally a topic invited into food discussions. By contrast, the term “vegetable” lacks scientific bottom. A Republican U.S. Supreme Court handed down the *Nix* rule, and the Reagan administration in 1981 proposed declaring ketchup to be a vegetable suitable for school children. Today, the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s food pyramid prefers leafy plants but counts beans, a legume, in the vegetable category, even though a bean with seeds developing or developed is actually a fruit.

The bean began life in Mesoamerica and came to Arkansas after corn (maize) and squash (the ancestor of yellow squash is the common white Ozark gourd). Early beans were doubtless first eaten raw, but

with the development of pottery, they were invaluable as dried beans. Even today, the ancient Anasazi bean variety is increasingly available in stores.

Once Europeans arrived, beans became part of the Columbian exchange. A few Euro-Americans got their beans directly from “Indians,” but mostly the beans went to Europe and after domestication, turned around and came home. This process has been poorly understood. In a history of Craighead County’s Lamberson bean, Ara Lamberson Kirksey wrote that before leaving Arkansas, some “Indians” gave her grandfather, George Washington Lamberson, a Number Three washtub planted with three stalks of white pole beans. She thought the “Indians” must have gotten the beans from earlier white settlers.

The first beans were vines. Pole beans—so-called because they needed a trellis, pole, or corn stocks to grow on—formed the grandfather class of the common (*Vulgaris*) bean. Beans mutated easily. The International Centre for Tropical Agriculture houses some 27,000 varieties.

By the nineteenth century there was a growing demand for other vine heights. Hence, a popular bean from South Carolina, the Dutch half-runner, showed up in Washington, Arkansas in 1847. This bean grows perfectly up a four or five foot fence. A noted food writer praised these beans in a 1994 article that included a picture of their rich bounty on such a fence. In the twentieth century bush beans gained in popularity, even though their shorter growing season made them less productive. With bush beans the emphasis almost always has been on eating them be-

“The bean began life in Mesoamerica and came to Arkansas after corn (maize) and squash (the ancestor of yellow squash is the common white Ozark gourd). Early beans were doubtless first eaten raw, but with the development of pottery, they were invaluable as dried beans. Even today, the ancient Anasazi bean variety is increasingly available in stores.”

fore seeds mature. Commonly called green or string beans, this dish in Arkansas was cooked with bacon or ham. Often onions were added, and the cooking time given by the *Boston Cooking School Cookbook* as late as 1923 was up to three hours. More mature beans, either within or without the pod, were called shell(y) beans.

The final stage was dry beans, which ranged in color from black to white, with pastels, spots, and stripes for good measure. Boston baked beans and any number of bean soups were among their common uses. Families stored seed beans for the next year. One method of keeping the weevils out was to use a tin can topped by a white cloth flavored with turpentine, with some mothballs and snuff among the beans for good measure. The Lamberson bean



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WHITE CREASEBACK. Pods grow in clusters, 5 to 6 inches long, perfectly round. Dry seeds are pure white and excellent for winter use.

LAZY WIFE'S. Pods are medium dark green, broad and 4 to 6 inches long, stringless and tender.

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FORDHOOK BUSH LIMA. Beans are very plump, pods borne in clusters, 4 to 5 inches long, very tender.

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CUCUMBERS

Packet, 5 cents; ounce, 15 cents; one-fourth pound, 50 cents.

ARLINGTON WHITE SPINE. Very early, color deep green. The trucker's favorite.

KLONDIKE. Long green, very early. Also excellent for pickling.

CUMBERLAND. Very straight smooth fruit of the White Spine type. Fine for pickling.

—67—

Vestal's Spring Guide seed catalog, 1922, courtesy of the University of Central Arkansas Archives

barely survived the drought of 1930, and doubtless many traditional family (heirloom) beans were lost that year as well.

Storekeepers sold seeds in Arkansas even in territorial days, and with the growth of commercial seed companies, other names began to appear. The Texas Pole, first mentioned in 1864, became Kentucky Wonder, (also called Old Homestead) in 1877 and has remained a favorite. Still, heirloom varieties can be found. In addition to the Lamberson, Searcy County boasts the Thousand-in-One Bean.

Beans seem often to have lighted fires. Kirksey, author of the article on the Lamberson bean, was denounced by some family members for revealing the story. In 2009 an attempt by John Proctor to patent a common Mexican yellow bean he named Enola ended in defeat. Patenting nature and corporate attempts to control the world's water supply remain issues, a topic presaged in John Nichol's notable novel, *The Milagro Beanfield War* (1974).

Arkansas bean lovers can experiment with filet beans, those tiny green pods that can change from

soft to hard in one hot day; find upscale restaurants that serve beans in the "northern" way (two-thirds raw); or they can go back to basics with a monstrously good pot of well-cooked green beans.

Let the "South Arkansas Vine Ripe Pink Tomato"—even though it is rarely grown and doubtless has never been seen by the majority of Arkansans who get their imported, chemically-treated-to-look-red *Lycopersicums* from supermarkets—remain the state fruit, but let the Green Bean, in all its varieties, become the State Vegetable. It is, in the Latin *vulgaris*—common and hence so Arkansaucable.

Further reading:

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Dougan, Michael B., "Green Bean Lore: A History Professor Talks About His Arkansas Beans," *Arkansas Times*, XX (April 14, 1994), 23.

Kirksey, Ara Lamberson (Neely), "The History of the Lamberson Beans," *Craighead County Historical Quarterly*, XXXI (July 1993), 18-25.

Ruttle, Jack, "High-Stake Green Beans," *National Gardening*, XIV (May-June 1991), 42-47.

Dr. Michael B. Dougan is Distinguished Professor Emeritus at Arkansas State University.

Arkansas Barbecue

By Kane Webb

It is a moment of grace before the meal, a pause for reflection, gratitude, and curiosity. Breathe deeply. Exhale. The mouth waters. You unwrap the wax paper, lift the barbecue sandwich—pulled pork, never beef—to your lips, bite with confidence and expectation and . . . analyze.

This is the way Arkansans eat their barbecue. We may not all be food critics, self-styled foodies, or gourmands, but when it comes to pulled-pork barbecue sandwiches, we do have our standards.

Have you ever made Craig's in DeValls Bluff at lunchtime on a weekday? Dress-shirted elbow, next to coveralls, next to tourist uniform of t-shirt and shorts, the customers all want the same thing—the kind of transcendental experience that comes only from eating the perfect barbecue pork sandwich, while fully understanding the unlikelihood of finding said sandwich. Like the quest for the Holy Grail, the search for barbecue nirvana is the point of the endeavor.

Luckily for Arkansans, unbeknownst to the barbecue-erati from the Great Elsewhere, our state provides enough hickory-smoked goodness for a lifetime's worth of moments of grace.

We could start in the Delta, which seems to produce at least as many barbecue restaurants, shacks, and dives per capita as it does musicians. But let's not. Let's start with The Shack, now a piece of Little Rock folklore—and the basis for a few arguments as to legitimate Shack descendants and Shack connections—but for more than five decades, the gold standard for barbecue in the state.

For a while, The Shack was about the only standard. It had the barbe-



Pulled pork sandwich on Texas toast, photograph by Timothy G. Nutt

cue market much to itself in Central Arkansas—and beyond, to judge by the folks who came from outside the capital city for that famous Shack sauce and hickory-smoked pork.

From the time Casey Slaughter first opened The Shack in 1934 until the last loose interpretation of the restaurant closed for good in July 1988 after changing hands what seemed like two dozen times, much of Arkansas wasn't barbecue country. At least not barbecue restaurant country, which may explain why Arkansas too often is overlooked when national magazines, the Food Network, or the travel shows get a-hankerin' for some barbecue and go list crazy. Best Barbecue In The South! Road Eats! Hidden Sauce!

These days you can find barbecue shacks just about everywhere across the Natural State. Loyalists line up behind their favorites, new and old, like Sim's, Whole Hog, White Pig Inn, and Famous Dave's. One Little Rock weekly paper, in an at-

tempt to find the best barbecue pork sandwich in Central Arkansas, made stops at 45 different restaurants in three counties. Even the perception is starting to change from the outside. *Maxim* magazine recently listed Little Rock's Capitol Smokehouse as one of the best barbecue restaurants around, and Craig's has been feted in *Garden & Gun* magazine.

What made The Shack so popular in its day is what makes Arkansas barbecue, well, Arkansas barbecue: sauce and pork and the way the two go together. The original Shack sauce was described by various critics and barbecue connoisseurs as "moderately thick, rich, sweet and piquant," "tangy fare," and "black-pepper-laden fire." If a sauce can be all that to different folks, it's got staying power. In the case of The Shack, the sauce was complemented by the pork, hickory smoked, which absorbed just enough of the sweet, piquant, tangy, black-pepper-laden fire without losing its own flavor. The result

was a sandwich that still gets talked about today.

Since its demise, several restaurants in Central Arkansas claim Shack roots—original, franchise, or some other latter day version. An official count of Shack relatives includes H.B.'s in Little Rock, Jo-Jo's Barbecue in Sherwood, Smitty's Bar-B-Que in Conway, Smokehouse BBQ in Conway, and the Smoke Shack in Maumelle.

What has added to The Shack legend is that familiar Arkansas emotional cocktail: stubborn pride in our traditions and an almost desperate yearning for legacy, which can elevate a restaurant to an institution. After a while, the food becomes secondary to the experience and the nostalgia.

Taking the measure of Arkansas's barbecue culture and history so far, the food still comes first. Unlike Texas or North Carolina, which have embraced and promoted their winning barbecue traditions almost as much as their football and basketball teams, Arkansans are still in the eating and critiquing stages. We're still playing the game.

A few years back, some Arkansas journalists made a barbecue tour out of a drive through the Delta — digesting their way from Craig's to Jones's in Marianna, J.R.'s in Poplar Grove, Shadden's near Marvell, and Gene's in Brinkley. (And surely they missed some great roadside eats in their one-day blitzkrieg of swine dining. Theirs was not a comprehensive list, just a decent start.)

Notice a pattern with these places? Gene's, J.R.'s, Jones's . . . all names. Check your pretensions at the door, as well as your knives, forks, and clean white shirts. With luck, you might shake the legendary hands of Gene or Mr. Jones or J. of J.R.'s (the R. sold out). Mr. Craig is long gone and Mr. Shadden recently passed, perhaps taking his barbecue institution with him. Such is the fate of family-run restaurants in which the family


has scattered to ocean, prairie, and mountain, leaving the patriarch to carry on until he's carried out.

The BBQ tour through the Delta resulted in an unfulfilled quest for the perfect pork sandwich, of course, but the intrepid eaters got a healthy side of tradition-in-the-making. Even now, Shadden's—boarded up and closed since Wayne Shadden's death in the summer of 2010—seems more appreciated in retrospect, one of its signs having ascended to food culture heaven at a museum in New Orleans.

run border to border. A few days after that Delta tour, when word spread of all those must-stops in southeast Arkansas, one of the journalists received an invitation and challenge to try the barbecue in Fayetteville at Penguin Ed's BBQ.

Sometime later, the same journalist stumbled into a barbecue hotbed in Blytheville, of all unexpected places, where cars lined up a half-block for pork sandwiches at a drive-thru smokehouse called Famous Yank's.

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Advertisement for The Shack, from the Southwestern Bell telephone directory, 1981

We are fortunate to be a barbecue state in a barbecue state—a figurative sauce still in experimental need of that just-right ingredient, the smoked pork which is a hickory chip away from delectability.

It is worth noting, too, that the Arkansas barbecue craze seems to

The history of barbecue in Arkansas? It's still being made. Let the pork sandwiches, challenges, critiques, and arguments continue for . . . ever.

Kane Webb is a veteran journalist, political pundit, and food lover from Little Rock.

Jewels of the Delta

Three Chicot County Eateries Preserve The Tradition of Fine Delta Cuisine

By Tom DeBlack

History has not been kind to the Arkansas Delta. Once the center of wealth and political power in Arkansas, it is now the poorest region in the state and one of the poorest in the nation. Many of the Delta's once vibrant, agriculturally-based towns are either dead or dying, and prospects for the future are uncertain. In at least one regard, however, the Delta more than holds its own with the rest of the state, for there, in a number of establishments large and small, can be found some of the best food anywhere. Nowhere is this more evident than in a ten mile span of U. S. Highways 82 and 65 in Chicot County, stretching from the Mississippi River west to the county seat at Lake Village.

My first exposure to Chicot County cuisine came in the 1990s when I was doing research on the Lakeport Plantation house, Arkansas's only remaining plantation home on the Mississippi River, and like the earliest settlers, I started my experience near the river. A local resident showed me around the area and suggested that we finish the day with a meal at the Cow Pen Restaurant, located near the approach to the 1940s era Highway 82 bridge across the Mississippi River. It was a memorable introduction to Chicot County cuisine.

Established in 1967, the Cow Pen had once been an inspection site for cattle coming into the state from Mississippi. Through three sets of owners the restaurant established a wide-ranging reputation for its award-winning steaks, seafood,

Mexican, and Italian fare. The current owners—Charles Faulk III and wife Teresa, Charles Faulk IV and wife Lydia—took over the restaurant in 2007. Shortly thereafter a fire destroyed the Cow Pen. The Faulks decided to rebuild on the same spot, and the Cow Pen reopened a year and a week after the fire. The new incarnation is slightly larger than the original (capacity 240) and the menu has been slightly tweaked from time to time (a new crawfish pasta combines two elements of the restaurant's tradition), but the Cow Pen retains its original ambiance and the food that made it a Delta dining tradition. The Arkansas approach to the spectacular new Mississippi River bridge is even closer to the restaurant than the old structure, and the magnificently-restored Lakeport Plantation house, now open for tours, is also close by. The new bridge promises to expand the restaurant's appeal to an even larger following from neighboring Mississippi and Louisiana.

Even before they purchased the Cow Pen, the Faulks had gained a loyal following at the Lake Shore Café, located about four miles west of the Cow Pen on Highway 82. In 1998 Charles Faulk III bought and renovated the Lake Shore Motel on scenic Lake Chicot (Arkansas's largest natural lake and the largest oxbow lake in North America) and decided that he needed a restaurant to go with it. Beginning in 2001 the Lake Shore Café became a sort of unofficial headquarters for me and the other members of a team of preservationists who were working to restore and develop an interpretive plan for

the Lakeport Plantation house.

The plate lunches at Lake Shore are unsurpassed, especially the fresh vegetables. The restaurant's signature eggplant dishes—fried eggplant and Elizabeth's baked eggplant casserole—are a tribute to Charles Faulk III's mother, a self-trained Southern cook who always prepared Sunday lunch for the entire family. Excellent steaks and seafood are also staples of the Lake Shore. On Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights the restaurant serves a more upscale menu. The recent addition of chef Michael Moore has brought a New Orleans flair to these weekend offerings. A recent entree was *Crème de Bayou Stuffed Filet*, featuring a choice beef tenderloin stuffed with shrimp and crab meat, covered in a shrimp cream sauce. Both the Lake Shore Café and the Cow Pen feature live music on the weekends.

The final jewel of Chicot County eating establishments lies a few miles farther west on St. Mary's Street in Lake Village, a town that has fared much better than most of its Delta cousins. The first time that I went looking for Rhoda Adams' small restaurant I drove past it twice without ever seeing it. To say that the building that houses Rhoda's is nondescript is an understatement. It is a small, weathered structure topped by a faded sign that says "Rhoda's Famous Hot Tamales," and beneath that in small letters, "Also Hamburgers, Pies, and hot lunches."

Rhoda and her husband James operate the establishment with the help of various other family members. As far as the tamales are con-



Rhoda's Famous Hot Tamales, Lake Village, photograph by Tom DeBlack

cerned, it is probably sufficient to say that no less an authority than the *Delta Democrat Times* of nearby Greenville, Mississippi, once named Rhoda's tamales as the best in the Delta, no small honor considering that tamales are a Delta specialty and the Mississippi side of the Delta boasts a number of renowned tamale establishments.

No one who tastes Rhoda's tamales will argue with the *Times'* assessment. On my first trip, however, I was looking for a good plate lunch, and I found it. Rhoda's offers three vegetables and a meat for \$5.50. On my first visit Rhoda herself was working the lunch line. I chose cabbage, sweet potatoes, beans, and spaghetti and meatballs. When I finished my order, Rhoda asked me what

meat item I wanted. I replied that I had already ordered the spaghetti and meatballs. "Honey," she said with an amused smile, "that's not a meat," and she promptly dropped two large catfish filets on my already overloaded plate.

After a plate lunch at Rhoda's, you really don't need a dessert. Get one anyway. Rhoda's makes some of the best fried pies anywhere, as well as equally delicious chocolate, coconut, sweet potato, and pecan pies. A Rhoda's specialty is the combination pie—half sweet potato and half pecan or half chocolate and half coconut under a common meringue topping. Just how Rhoda does this remains a delicious mystery.

A trip to this southernmost part of the Arkansas Delta provides the

visitor with valuable insights into this unique region of the state. Lake Chicot gives evidence of the Delta's great natural beauty, the restored Lakeport Plantation house provides a starting point for understanding its past, and the new Mississippi River bridge offers hope for its future. The Cow Pen Restaurant, the Lake Shore Café, and Rhoda's Famous Hot Tamales help to keep alive a part of the Delta's rich cultural heritage—the tradition of fine dining. These three jewels of the Delta are a must for any connoisseur of Arkansas cuisine.

Tom DeBlack is a professor of history at Arkansas Tech and past president of the Arkansas Historical Association.

More Than Just a Place to Eat

By Trey Berry

Community and friendship. Those are the words cemented in my mind when it comes to eating burgers in Arkansas. I know most people think of sliced tomatoes, melted cheese, sesame seed buns, or even the commercial double golden arches, but for this south Arkansas boy, dining at Arkansas burger eateries represents more than just a place to eat—those eating experiences have shown me, throughout my 49 years, the importance of community, face-to-face conversations, and lasting friendships.

One of my earliest and fondest memories as a young boy was our family's regular trips down Highways 67 and 29 to my grandparents' home. For the Berry clan, family vacations usually meant visits to my maternal grandparents in north Louisiana. On each of these treks through rural south Arkansas in the 1960s and 1970s, we made a necessary and greatly anticipated stop in Lewisville, Arkansas at the original Burge's Restaurant.

Opened in 1962 by Alden and Margaret Burge, the restaurant quickly became an anchor in the small south Arkansas town. It remains that centerpiece today. While most people equate Burge's with smoked ham or turkey, I remember it as a place where wonderful, fresh cheeseburgers could be enjoyed by our family. Four times a year we would purchase our food at the sliding glass windows and take our meals on the picnic tables at the side and back of the little restaurant. As I ate, I remember meeting hungry travelers from around the mid-South region. There in that small town where Highway 29 twists at two right angles, a boy of eight years old met people from exotic locations like

“There in that small town where Highway 29 twists at two right angles, a boy of eight years old, met people from exotic locations like Mississippi, Texas, and Tennessee who were traveling the state for business and pleasure before the arrival of the interstates.”

Mississippi, Texas, and Tennessee who were traveling the state for business and pleasure before the arrival of the interstates.

The memory that is most vivid involves the townspeople of Lewisville. These people would take their food, sit on the tailgates of their trucks or at the picnic tables, and visit about various important matters in the world of Lafayette County and beyond. It was clear to me that this burger joint was more than just a place to eat the ultimate American comfort food; it was an outdoor community center where people crossed paths, shared stories, or found out about local events and news.

For centuries all humans have used eating venues as places to socialize and communicate about their place in the world. The hamburger establishments in small communities throughout Arkansas became centers of socialization—important hubs for building community and friendships—from the 1940s into the 2000s.

As I began my professional career at Ouachita Baptist University in Arkadelphia during the 1980s and 1990s, I had the opportunity to travel even more extensively around Arkansas and sample some of the state's best burgers in very small communities. During those travels, I was always asked, “What was the best burger you ever ate?” So many come to mind. Whether it is at Julie's in Friendship, Arkansas, Pat's Burgers in Saratoga, Ray's in Monticello, Cotham's in Scott, or The Dog House in Glenwood— all were fabulous! But like that boy of eight years old in Lewisville during the 1960s, one thing I observed continued to be true about these “joints” thirty years later. They still were not only filling Arkansas bellies with juicy, thick slabs of hamburger patties and cheese; they were still filling the role of community meeting places and news centers for these small hamlets. Is that what made these burgers taste so great to me? It was not just about the food; it was a chance to observe Arkansas people, Arkansas history, and a dying piece of Arkansas culture.

And dying is what has begun to occur in many of these very small towns. Their demise began in the late 1970s and 1980s and continues today. I've heard numerous theories about the decline of these classic Arkansas burger spots. They range from the expansion of chain restaurants, the building of and growing use of interstate highways, the continuing urbanization of Arkansas society, to the increasing number of households with gas grills where Arkansas families can create their own burger masterpieces. Some or all of these may be correct, but there is a certainty that one by one, I have watched the windows become boarded, the “Closed”



Ray's in Monticello, one of the author's favorite burger joints, photograph by Trey Berry

sign become permanent, and the weeds grow in the gravel parking lots where so many Arkansas stories were exchanged.

When these burger places died, so did the communities, many of which were already living on the precipice of existence. Gone were the one-of-a-kind burgers and sandwiches, no more were the conversations about local news and stories, the weather forecast, who was marrying whom, who was ill or in need, and whose child had recently “gone off to college.”

We have begun to replace those experiences with Facebook, the Weather Channel, ESPN, and text messaging. We have not replaced the opportunities in these small towns for face-to-face conversations, the enjoyment of hearing friends laugh at old and new stories, and the ability to enjoy Arkansas grilled beef patties with acquaintances far and wide. Today, as we travel through small town Arkansas, these once plentiful and vibrant eating and gathering spots have begun to go the way of the

“...one thing I observed continued to be true about these ‘joints’ thirty years later. They still were not only filling Arkansas bellies with juicy, thick slabs of hamburger patties and cheese; they were still filling the role of community meeting places and news centers for these small hamlets. Is that what made these burgers taste so great to me?”

ivory-billed woodpecker, with a few scattered sightings—rare, and possibly headed for extinction. As a historian and small town Arkansas boy, I hope not.

But perhaps not all is lost? Just last week, my family joined friends at their home in Arkadelphia for a time of fellowship and hamburgers. We sat on their back deck, ate our delicious Arkansas-made delicacies, and talked about our kids, the weather, who was marrying whom, and politics. As we sat there enjoying food and friends, it struck me that this might be the new Arkansas burger joint, although on a smaller community scale. Is this the way the legacy of small Mom and Pop places continues? Maybe. I’m hoping that is so.

Arkansas burgers might still be bringing us together in the 21st Century, as we gather around them to build friendships and community. May it ever be so.

Trey Berry is a noted historian, author, and deputy director of the Department of Arkansas Heritage.

On the Making of Fried Green Tomatoes

By Kat Robinson

Ever since the book *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle-stop Café* hit the bestseller list in 1987, the South has been branded. Fannie Flagg's book (and the subsequent movie) brought the little side dish from something you did when you were frying up catfish and other foods to its own unique place in the pantheon of Southern foods. The crispy rounds quickly surpassed all but grits in their recognition for edible options below the Mason-Dixon line.

Sadly, that's meant a lot of misinterpretations around these parts. Part of the hazard associated with my job of food writer is the consumption of sub-par fried green tomatoes. The usual issue is bad breading—either the restaurant in question has gone for a single dip in the cornmeal and somehow expected the mess to stick to the tomato slice through the cooking process, or the battered slices are far too thin to battle the crust. I've seen it happen over and over again, even at some of my favorite places to eat. Sometimes there's a consistency failure from one visit to the next.

The thing is, the fried green tomatoes have become so expected on Southern menus that sometimes they border on the ubiquitous. They're everywhere—not just on the menus of mom and pop country stores—but Paula Deen's Buffet at Harrah's in Tunica, fine dining establishments like Ashley's in Little Rock, and even a couple of Chinese food places I've visited. And I will admit, prepared correctly, they can be quite satisfying. But I believe the proliferation of fried green tomatoes belies where they came from.



Frying green tomatoes in an iron skillet, photograph by Kat Robinson

Now, a green tomato is a sacrifice. It's a red tomato that hasn't had the opportunity to get that red. In good years you could eat them and not feel guilty—you'd have tomatoes coming off the vine all summer long. In bad years, though, you wouldn't take them unless you just couldn't help it.

Green tomatoes are also used for other things, like pickles and relish. Perhaps they came from the leftovers, I don't know. I just see their similarity to catfish in the way they're cooked and breaded. Like any good Southern cook, I know how to prepare fried green tomatoes and any other sort of fried thing. For this purpose, I keep a cast iron skillet

for pan-frying. I have oil in the cabinet and individual plastic containers of both cornmeal and flour in the freezer. These latter two items are great when you have something to bread and fry, whether it be catfish, chicken, okra, or tomatoes. It's a dry batter—kept on by the moisture of the food item and by the application of an egg wash and milk dipped in between the flour and the cornmeal. It's a flour dip first, then egg wash, and finally cornmeal. I usually salt the egg wash, too. Two minutes on each side in the hot grease and you're done. Drain those suckers.

See, the funny thing is, I only make fried green tomatoes when they are appropriate to make—be-

tween June and September when it's possible to find fresh local tomatoes. Hothouse tomatoes just don't have that right bite—that particular sharpness—that the dish requires. But when they are in season, I have to make them. My Yankee husband loves them, but only when they come out of our kitchen. Funny, that.

Now this may be the point where you're asking yourself "why green tomatoes and not red ones?" The reason for that, outside of the tartness you really want to experience, is firmness. Yes, I have encountered store-bought tomatoes that have the appropriate firmness, but if you get a red tomato with firmness, chances are it has lost its taste. I have never encountered a fully red tomato that was sturdy enough to dry-batter twice and deep fry. Never.

Will the fried green tomato ever go away? It's doubtful. Will there still be bad ones? I think so—as long as restaurants serve them way out of season or when proper preparation and tasting haven't been done. But when done right, a fried green tomato slice is about the best thing you can have on the side of your plate during summer. That's my opinion, take it for what you will.

Kat Robinson is a Little Rock-based food and travel writer. She writes Eat Arkansas, The Blog for Food Lovers for the Arkansas Times, found at <http://www.arktimes.com/blogs/eatarkansas/> and Tie Dye Travels, her blog found at <http://www.tiedyetravels.com>.

Call for Menu Donations

As a part of its foodways initiative, Special Collections is seeking to build a collection of Arkansas menus. While we are especially seeking older menus, recent ones will be welcomed too. We are looking for:

- Restaurant menus
- Menus for special events
- Menus for family meals, such as descriptions of meals in handwritten letters

If you wish to donate a menu, please mail it to or contact Timothy G. Nutt, Assistant Department Head and Manuscripts Librarian, University of Arkansas Libraries, Special Collections Department, 365 N. McIlroy Avenue, Fayetteville, AR. 72701, phone: 479-575-8443, e-mail: timn@uark.edu.



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Blackberry Cobbler Evokes Summer Fun

By Louise Terzia

Just the words “blackberry cobbler” conjure up for me the overexposure of the summer sun, wasps, chiggers, stickers, mouth-burning inky oozing juices, endless waiting and hanging around the kitchen with the hot oven.

Until yesterday, I firmly believed our mother made the best blackberry cobbler. Summers in Shreveport, my brothers would ride their bikes to the places where blackberry canes hung with the sweetest darkest berries. They were wild blackberries, not so oddly huge as today’s, just a nice moderate berry—but tasty!

Our mom made her cobbler with a piecrust-type pastry. I still prefer it; the heavy biscuit crust has never appealed to me. Hers was wonderfully golden brown and crispy, sinking down, drowning in the hot juices. Not really losing its substance because it just didn’t take that long to eat it—once it cooled down from its initial molten hotness. It’s been years since I had Mom’s cobbler. I’ve looked through her cookbooks and magazine clippings, but haven’t found the recipe. Wish I had thought to ask.

At any rate—having had the best, I felt confident when asked to judge the Blackberry Cobbler Competition at friend Allen Smith’s family reunion. Thirteen competitors, some friends and some family members, brought their best cobblers. Allen was sweet enough to include me in his foster family and friends get together at Moss Mountain Farm north of Little Rock.

A friend and I drove the twenty or so miles up to the farm on a really hot Saturday this past summer. After a huge potluck lunch, we joined four other non-family judges gathering



Blackberry cobbler and vanilla ice cream, photograph by Louise Terzia

at the long table where the thirteen entries were lined up. Frankly, it was daunting to look along at least 18 feet of blackberry cobblers. Printed forms instructed us to give each cobbler 1 to 10 points in four categories: Presentation, Flavor of Juice/Berries, Flavor of Pastry/Crust and Overall Flavor.

I admit I was the first person to break into Cobbler #1, not being one to hang back at such a moment. Often a miserable failure at identifying subtle overtones in wine, I found that the deep mysterious flavors of blackberry cobblers really sang out to me. One had a deep rich flavor, much like a cabernet. Another cobbler was heavily perfumed with vanilla—overpowering to my taste. Yet another seemed to have an herb flavor, not quite right. Some did indeed have that just-right blackberry flavor,

though. Just great berries and sugar with not much else doctoring them up.

Then there was the matter of crust. I have that preference for a pastry crust and I just couldn’t get past it. The biscuit-type crust always seems heavy and doughy, much like a dense dumpling. Forgive me if that’s how your mama makes it.

There were several good pastry crusts, thin and crispy around the edges where it was stuck to the pan with the sugary juices, almost burned. That’s just about the best part and I sampled each cobbler with a bite from the edge, as well as some of the juicy fruit. After much tabulating and checking of points, there was a clear winner and a pretty close runner-up. The winning entry had a delicious pastry crust which had been formed over a mound of ber-

ries. As the berries cooked down, the crust was left looking much like a volcano with the vent hole on top. The cook had poured a buttery sweet sauce over the crust and there was a sugary crunch to it.

The runner-up was quite different. That pastry was cut into small squares which were each topped with a spoonful of blackberry filling. The points of the squares curved up and were very crunchy. Each had a dab of a white topping, maybe sweetened ricotta cheese?

As soon as we declared the winners, Allen and some helpers brought in four batches of homemade vanilla ice cream to adorn the cobblers. By that time we were too full—I'm pretty sure it's the only time I've ever turned down home-churned ice cream. On the way home, I talked about how as good as the winners were, they weren't as good as Mom's cobbler.

That all changed yesterday, when I was out at Allen's place again. This time it was his recipe. It was fantastic—juicy and intense with rich, deep blackberry flavor. Baked in individual cups, the crust was crisp, flakey and very buttery (could he possibly have used lard like my mom probably did?). I couldn't stay away from it. Several of us were sharing it as we worked in the kitchen; I kept circling back with a fresh spoon.

This morning I rushed to write a thank you note, part of my strategy to be invited back for more and maybe the recipe? Mom would approve.

Louise Terzia is the director of development for the Historic Arkansas Museum in Little Rock and a member of the Southern Foodways Alliance.

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How to Cook a Steak

Introduction by Rex Nelson, Guest Editor

Charles J. Finger lived a life filled with adventure, and he didn't hesitate writing about those adventures. The native of Willesden, England, wrote 36 books during the final two decades of his life. Most of those books were young adult adventure stories, many of which drew

him in England and became active in an intellectual socialist movement known as the Fabian Society, whose purpose was to advance the principles of socialism through gradual rather than revolutionary means. In 1890 Finger joined the crew of a ship bound for Chile. He worked in the region for the next several years,

co in 1904 to work for the El Paso & Northeastern Railroad.

After stops in Ohio, Finger found his way to Fayetteville in 1920. He wrote prolifically while learning everything he could about the folklore of the Ozarks. His country home, which he named Gayeta Lodge, became a gathering place

“First see that your steak is at least two inches thick, with rich fat on it, refusing any meat which has been spoiled by butchers in the modern wasteful way by trimming off the fat.”

heavily on his own exploits. Twenty-nine of the books were for the “Little Blue Books” series, which was published by E. Haldeman-Julius of Kansas.

Finger received the Newberry Medal in 1924 for “Tales from Silver Lands” and the Longmans Juvenile Fiction Award in 1929 for “Courageous Companions.”

Finger had been educated at King's College in London and in Frankfurt, Germany prior to his parents' move to the United States in 1887 when he was 20. Finger stayed be-

doing everything from herding sheep to acting as a tour guide.

By 1896 Finger was in New York. He later took a steamer bound for Galveston, Texas, and eventually wound up in San Angelo, Texas, herding sheep and writing newspaper articles. He established the San Angelo Music Conservatory in 1898. For the next six years, he taught music lessons and arranged concerts. Finger married the daughter of a sheep rancher in 1902 and moved to New Mexi-

for writers, artists and intellectuals from throughout the Ozarks. Finger died at Gayeta Lodge in January 1941.

Finger's daughter, Helen Finger Leflar of Fayetteville, donated her father's papers to the University of Arkansas in 1986. The papers contain correspondence, diaries, notebooks, manuscripts, clippings, photographs, film and other items. Finger's “How To Cook A Steak” gives the reader a sense of his florid writing style.



Left and opposite: Charles J. Finger mugs for the camera, San Angelo, Texas, ca. 1902, from the Charles J. Finger Papers, MC 639, Box 1

How to Cook a Steak

By Charles J. Finger (1867-1941)

There is a right way to cook a beef steak and as I cooked several on our trip, though I did not carry any cooking utensils but always hired them, and as I am writing of cooking, I may as well describe it. Follow the directions closely and if the steak is not better than any you ate in any hotel or restaurant, then set yourself down as a careless cook. Only last summer I taught one of the directors of the Trocadero, in London, how to do steak this way, which I learned when I lived with the Patagonian Indians years ago.

First see that your steak is at least two inches thick, with rich fat on it, refusing any meat which has been spoiled by butchers in the modern wasteful way by trimming off the fat. Next get two iron skillets. Tin frying pans will not do. Then see to it that your camp fire is a generous one and remember that you cannot cook a steak this way on a stove, no matter how prayerfully you try. Now, when you have your steak shaped to the exact size of the pan, and when the salt is so hot that to touch it would burn your finger, pack your steak in the pan then lay the other skillet, which must also be very hot, neatly over the first one, oven fashion. After one minute turn your steak and reset the skillets. So turn it four times, each time replacing the skillet.

By now you will attend to your cooking with growing fervor because of the savory smell that hangs in the air. If you are skillful and do not burn your hands, you will see the meat changing color with increasing delight. But, by the nine gods, I swear that if you put lard or anything of the kind into the skillet you will have utterly spoiled the meal. Also keep your fire bright without smoke. In between, sharpen well your knife, for you will need it. Now, after the fourth turning let the meat stay, closely covered, for ten minutes. Then uncover it and turn it, letting it stay for another ten minutes. Twenty-four minutes now your steak has been cooking and it is ready to be served hot, on hot plates. Or, if you would add a last delicate touch and are given to luxury, do this. Put your top skillet on the fire, in a clean place not too hot; throw in a quarter pound of unsalted butter; cut your steak into strips right across and about two inches in width; and place these strips uncrusted side down in the melted butter, turning them after a minute. You will find your meat the softest and most tender you have ever eaten.

You will drink wine in thanksgiving for having read this. Many, seeing me thus cook steaks, sorely feared disaster, seeing the amount of salt I used. But the secret of it all is that you make a crust about your meat, and the meat inside the crust cooks in its own juices. So long as people try to get along with thin steaks, so long must they have tough meat and suffer from indigestion and all the ills that follow. For, as a moment's reflection will show, while with a thin steak there are crusts, yet those crusts meet, and there is nothing in the middle.

Accuse me not of boasting when I say that I have seen poetesses, and lady singers, and philosophers, to say nothing of Carl Sandburg, and Paul Honore, and a professed vegetarian who shall be nameless, take three and four servings of a steak thus prepared. A man having thus eaten is full of reveries. Charity is in him. He becomes a pleasant and refreshing companion. He is not as those who, because of perverse fate, must eat in short-order houses, and, having finished what is misnamed a steak, feel something stirring and throbbing within.



A Slice of Heaven

The Pie Shop

By Ray Wittenberg

I like to drive by the PIE SHOP at night. It sits on the western edge of the White River town of DeValls Bluff—on the Little Rock side. The simple words “PIE” and “SHOP” were painted years ago with black letters on the outside wall just below a single light bulb that is always on, night and day.

At night, the words barely visible from the highway, float in the dark in the penumbra of the bulb’s light. There’s a dim silhouette of a screen door. You can barely make out an “OPEN” sign stuck inside the top of the screen door. This would be on one of my many drives over the years back to Little Rock from Memphis or further east—getting off the freeway at Brinkley and onto the two-lane Hwy 70, not missing the heavy I-40 traffic at all. When it’s warm outside you can do about 50 with the windows rolled down. You can smell the fields and even the river when you go over the bridge on the East side of town—the Memphis side.

Just a quick word about DeValls Bluff, because I can’t separate the town from the PIE SHOP. It’s a scruffy old river town where my grandfather used to keep a boat—a small, wide-decked paddle wheeler called the *Amharlee*—named after three men from St. Louis who owned the boat and brought it down the Mississippi, abandoning it for unknown reasons at DeValls Bluff in the 1940s. Before Hot Springs was the place to cool off, folks from Little Rock would drive over to the White River and cast out for a sandbar on the weekend. My grandfather would have friends down for eating, cards and drinking. Mary Thomas would have been in her early teens back then.

The PIE SHOP belongs to Mary.



The Pie Shop, DeValls Bluff, photograph by Ray Wittenberg

Born near Bisco on the east side of the White River, she found her way to DeValls Bluff early on. Mary has been making pies for as long as anyone can remember—for Mr. Craig’s BBQ joint across the road for 40 years and then at the PIE SHOP the last 20 or so.

On a bright July day it takes a while to get your eyes adjusted to the dim light in the PIE SHOP. To your left as you enter is a small table. There is always a Holy Bible sitting there. Above that table is a white board with the names of pies scrawled across it. The overwhelming scent of baking pies fills the air.

There’s a door into the kitchen. That door is kept closed by wrapping a little piece of string around a nail. The kitchen is a mess of pie tins, old crusty pots for cooking filling, a gas oven, and stovetop covered with a patina of burnt grease and burnt sugar, with a dusting of flour over everything. Mary is reluctant to let you back into her kitchen. That’s a sanctuary and set up her way. This is where the pies are conceived—day after day—legions of pies. I tried to figure up how many. It’s a wild guess—at least 12 pies a day, six days a week, 52 weeks out of the year, and

for 50 years— that’s 187,200 pies by my count.

A pie is round and beautiful. The best pies have an excellent crust that carries the filling but doesn’t break down and become mush. Great crust is the function of the delicate balance between shortening, flour, iced water, and baker. There is no butter in Mary’s crust, and the meringue is just egg whites and sugar, no crème of tartar.

Yes, a pie is known by its filling—pecan, coconut crème, peanut butter, lemon icebox, chocolate, strawberry, cherry, peach, and so on—but it is the harmony between crust and filling that makes a great pie! I usually get the coconut custard with its heavy crown of meringue.

They say good bakers have cool hands. Mary’s hands are not cool or hot, but old. I know the day will come when she’s gone. Who would or could take her place? I don’t know if I could buy a pie from anyone else in DeValls Bluff. It would feel very disloyal.

Ray Wittenberg of Little Rock, a former restaurant owner, is the advertising and development director for the Oxford American magazine.

Featured Cookbook

From Our Collection

The Rest Room and Library Cook Book

By Rex Nelson, Guest Editor

The Special Collections Department of the University of Arkansas Libraries has a collection of more than 1,000 cookbooks, the oldest of which was produced by the Sorosis Club of Monticello in 1924. The cookbook was professionally printed and bound, covering 133 pages with a blank page for notes.

It has the unusual title of *The Rest Room and Library Cook Book*. A cookbook for the restroom? It's not what you think. Ethel C. Simpson, who began the university's cookbook collection, explained it this way: "The 'rest room' of the title was a place where women could literally rest while waiting for their husbands or fathers to transact business."

The word "sorosis" comes from the Latin word for "sister." The cookbook was published to raise money for the club and is organized like many cookbooks with sections for soups, meats, vegetables, salads, desserts, etc.

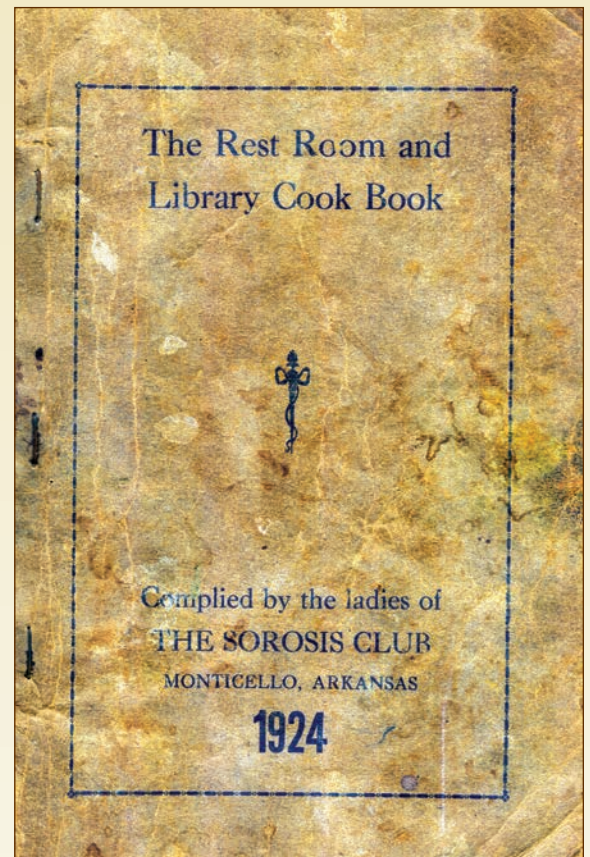
"Many recipes are very similar to their modern counterparts – bread has yeast and flour, custards have eggs and flavoring, pickles are made with vinegar and spices," Simpson wrote. "The differences, however, are more striking than the similarities." For example, there are:

- Instructions for pickling 100 pounds of beef
- A recipe for pepper sauce that requires 100 ground green peppers
- Beverage recipes for grape acid, grape phosphate and blackberry shrub
- Five recipes for oysters
- A recipe for roast goose

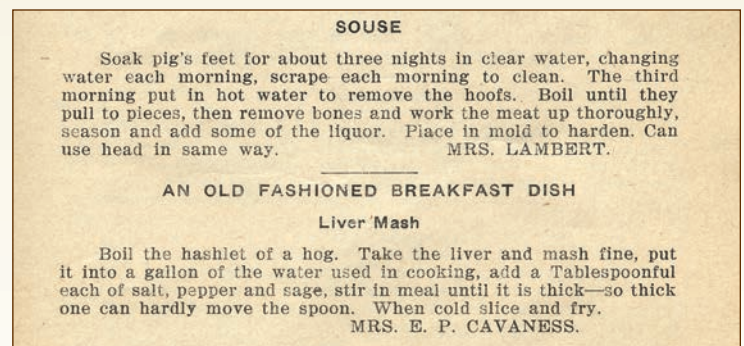
The cookbook also contains two recipes for brains and a recipe for chili con carne that instructs the cook to "chop 15 cents worth of round steak."

The recipes tend to be brief, and cooking times aren't given. The recipes usually just state that various items should be cooked until "soft," "brown," "thick," etc.

The cookbook contains advertisements for products and services, ranging from Confidence Flour to the Home Ice & Coal Company. A couple of unusual recipes are shown at right.



Cover of *The Rest Room and Library Cook Book*, 1924



Recipes from *The Rest Room and Library Cook Book*

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Featured Menu

GARLAND COUNTY VICTORY DINNER



HONORING

Sidney S. McMath

ARLINGTON HOTEL

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 15, 1948

Menu

FRUIT COCKTAIL CARDINAL

CELERY

MIXED OLIVES

CREAM OF FRESH MUSHROOMS ST. DENIS

CROUTONS SOUFFLE

MAMMY HANNAH FRIED CHICKEN, COUNTRY GRAVY

CORN FRITTER

RISSOLEE POTATOES

BUTTERED NEW PEAS

LETTUCE & TOMATO SALAD, FRENCH DRESSING

STRAWBERRY SUNDAE, PETIT FOURS

DEMI TASSE

Menu from a victory dinner
celebrating Sid McMath's election
as Governor, held in Hot Springs,
1948, from the Sidney S.
McMath Papers, MC 899