From left: Guava and sweet cheese turnovers from Back in the Day Bakery in Savannah, Georgia; Spanish-moss-covered oak trees at Morning Glory Homestead Farm on St. Helena Island, South Carolina.

HEART OF THE LOWCOUNTRY
Along the South Carolina and Georgia coasts, the Gullah-Geechee community guards a unique food culture born from Central and West African roots. MICHAEL W. TWITTY embarks on a pilgrimage to explore how the past informs the region's modern-day chefs, farmers, and culinary custodians.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY OLIVIA RAE JAMES
FOR SOME VISITORS, IT'S THE SPANISH MOSS

hanging from the trees. It's romantic, haunting—even mystical, they say. Some travelers go to the Lowcountry, and to the neighboring Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia, for the historic sites—the plantations and battlegrounds—or to play a round on the golf courses that many have become. Others go for the food: shrimp and grits; red rice; crab boiled with corn; potatoes and sausage that form a concoction known as Frogmore stew. I went for the Gullah-Geechee people who created this food, for their stories and traditions.

It just so happens they are part of my story, too.

This journey was a homecoming, as well as a personal renewal. The trips I'd taken before were about the dead. This one was about the living. I am a culinary historian turned culinary tourist. My purpose is to find where the food of the Gullah-Geechee people is and where it's going—a task that has become far more complicated since the spring, when the pandemic arrived on these shores.

Centuries ago, coastal Georgia and South Carolina was the landing place for many of the enslaved Africans brought to America to work on plantations. On the coast grew a blend of crops, but mainly indigo and rice (and more rice, and after that, even more rice). Along the tidal creeks and rivers, rice was king, and on the islands, silky, fragile Sea Island cotton reigned, keeping the cosmopolitan worlds of Charleston and Savannah, and their white gentry, moving.

Over time, the enslaved people of this region developed a cuisine of their own—one informed by their roots in West and Central Africa, but brought to life by the bountiful produce of the Lowcountry. Today, food is one of the few arenas where locals let their guard down, and cultural expression is as unabashed and as loud as you desire. This is where part of the story of Southern hospitality was born. As sure as you will sip pineapple iced tea, the Gullah-Geechee people are generous and obliging. There is an eagerness to prove that the food is special, that it has a history, and that it is a deeply important American cuisine. It has retained its African spirit despite the influence of British, German, French Huguenot, Sephardic Jewish, and Native American communities that, over
the course of centuries, informed Lowcountry cuisine and culture.

Friends from my current home, Maryland—Baltimore-based chefs David and Tonya Thomas, who are husband and wife—rode with me on this journey, but my chef-brother Benjamin "Bl" Dennis IV was my travel planner. Bl and I spent a few days crafting my stops—St. Helena Island, North Charleston and Charleston, Johns Island, Daufuskie Island, and Savannah. I met Bl, a Charleston native, a decade ago, when I did a series of talks and events on the cuisine of enslaved Africans at the city’s Magnolia Plantation, along the Ashley River. He has a reputation as a gatekeeper, but he’s more storyteller than anything. He wants to re-create the journey of the Gullah-Geechee through his pots. "Everybody needs to know that we’re not magical," he said. "We’re just a people trying to survive. We know we special. The world knows we special. We just don’t agree with outsiders on what that special means."

Passionate about traditional dishes and ingredients, Bl has been reconnecting me to my Gullah-Geechee heritage for more than a decade.
He caters events and hosts pop-up dinners throughout South Carolina, taking his guests beyond shrimp and grits. "Try this," with BJ, means fresh fruit from the yellowish-orange jelly palm, or a bite of conch (technically, Northern whelk) served with a white gravy over rice, or shredded okra leaves alongside pot-roasted venison. He comes by this knowledge honestly and sincerely; he learned to forage with his grandparents, and he makes his rounds with the culinary elders of the region—farmers, fishermen, oystermen and crabbers and shrimpers. They are the people who do more than just produce. They are the people who know.

Gullah-Geechee language used to be known as "baby talk," considered a confused adaptation of old-world English. But in our slightly more enlightened era, it's become appreciated as a tongue all its own, partly based on West African grammar and vocabulary.

Traditional Gullah-Geechee music crossed over into the mainstream during the Civil Rights era. This included the famous folk hymn, "Kumbaya," and the essential spiritual ritual, the Shout, a counterclockwise dance that is key to religious expression and is accompanied by percussive stomping and clapping, which further differentiated the Gullah-Geechee in the eyes of outsiders. Later, tourists began picking up palmetto-leaf roses and sweetgrass baskets woven by Gullah-Geechee artisans, which have become must-have American folk crafts. Others have gone to cry at Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, laying flowers in memory of the "Charleston Nine"—Black victims of the mass shooting in 2015.

To put it another way, Gullah-Geechee folks are a quiet people with a loud reputation. But most Gullah-Geechee have no interest in being performative or entertaining. They don't exist to demonstrate what makes them special. They are well aware that, like many traditional American cultures, theirs is being forced to morph or die. The challenges to Gullah-Geechee life have been legion: from hurricanes that destroyed the plantation economy and race riots in 1919 to the resulting Great Migration that siphoned many to the Northeast and the theft and gentrification of Gullah-Geechee farmsteads. Trust and respect have greater capital in this region than other places.

SOMETIMES IN THE 1760S, a woman from the Mende community in Sierra Leone disembarked from a slave ship in Charleston harbor. Sold at auction in a terrifying practice called "the scramble," where buyers rushed in and grabbed whatever enslaved chattel they chose, the woman, who had inherited centuries of knowledge about rice, cotton, and indigo growing and harvesting, became someone's property. She had a daughter, and that daughter had a daughter and named her Nora. Nora begat Hester, Hester had Josephine, Josephine had Mary, Mary had Hazel, and Hazel had Pat. And Pat, a child of the baby boom, had a Gen Xer, and that Gen Xer is me.

Think of this as my American story. In the Gullah-Geechee world there are come yas and there are been yas (a come ya is a newcomer, and a been ya is a native). I am definitely a come ya. But in the eyes of BJ and others, I am a returnee, a descendant of Gullah-Geechee people with roots in the areas around Charleston; Savannah; Wilmington, North Carolina; and Georgetown, South Carolina. The remarkable thing about the Gullah-Geechee is that the isolation and insularity of those who remained preserved a culture from ancient West and Central Africa. In the process, it encapsulated the multiple contradictions and the sweeping narrative of exile on the southeastern seaboard of America.

There is a through line that runs from Africa to the Lowcountry's fields of shimmering rice to today. I wanted to reaquaint myself with all of it. In the middle of the worst pandemic in a hundred years, I went to find out how Gullah-Geechee food culture is surviving despite the near collapse of American restaurants and...
A Culinary Tour of the Lowcountry

Charleston, Savannah, and Hilton Head Island in South Carolina all have hotels and homestays—perfect if you prefer a kitchen for cooking with market finds.

St. Helena Island
Bradley Seafood Market
This tiny spot sells the catch of the day—and the region’s best shrimp. 1482 Sea Island Pkwy; 843-898-2984.

Morning Glory Homestead Farm
Visit this 12-acre farm to learn about sustainable agriculture. morninggloryhomestead.com.

Bluffton
Mother Smokin’ Good
Check Instagram for the location of this roving barbecue truck. mother_smoking_good.

Red Stripes
A Caribbean-Lowcountry fusion restaurant known for its jerk chicken. redstripescc.com; entrees $12–$22.

Daufuskie Island
Sallie Ann Authentic Gullah Tour
The island’s oyster trade is a key part of this historical bus tour. 843-686-2227.

Savannah
Back in the Day Bakery
A place for outstanding cupcakes and other treats. backinthedaybakery.com.

The Grey
Modern Southern cuisine in an Art Deco former bus station. thegreyrestaurant.com; prix fixe from $65.

Vic’s on the River
This fine-dining restaurant is housed in a 19th-century warehouse. vicsontheriver.com; entrées $15–$30.

North Charleston
My Three Sons
You can’t go wrong with the red rice and smothered pork chops. mythreesonscharleston.com; entrées $12–$20.

Nana’s Seafood & Soul
The garlic crab with shrimp is a must-try. nanaseafoodandsole.com; entrées $9–$20.

Nigel’s Good Food
Don’t miss the signature stewed turkey wings. nigelsgoodfood.com; entrées $10–$16.

Shrimp & Grits
Famous for cheddar grits with salmon or garlic shrimp. shrimpandgritscalee.com; entrées $9–$13.

Johns Island
Joseph Fields Farm
Farm raised organic fruit and vegetables grown on 60 idyllic acres. josephfieldsfarm.com.
Our first morning in St. Helena was spent at Morning Glory Homestead Farm, a small agro- and ecotourism space run by farmers Tony and Belinda Jones. The land was once part of a larger cotton plantation that Tony's family had lived on since 1862. He and his wife started in the egg and poultry business. Heritage-bred turkeys, guinea fowl, chickens, and ducks pranced around, keeping the bugs down as they moved past the bushes of basil out front. Melinda told me, "You can camp out here, get a home-cooked meal over an open fire—shrimp and okra, corn bread, crowder peas, and rice." It's served with some of their delicious teas, which are flavored with herbs, limes, and oranges grown on the property. The vegetables are as fresh as you can get—sweet bell peppers, lacinato kale, heirloom collards, and bitter melon, to name a few.

I've been to many places like this in search of the roots of Black culture, and to bear witness to environments where Black history occurred. What amazes me is that many of them are quiet and lonely, and carry no sign of the enormity of their significance. Dungeons on the coast of West Africa, plantation kitchens, places where men and women ran away from bondage to take up arms for their freedom. Sites of Civil Rights resistance, places of trauma and triumph—all remarkably sleepy. But you'll learn quickly, driving through the Lowcountry, that this region and its people are the antithesis of that, especially when it comes to food.

We drove south to Bluffton, where we stopped at a fantastic little restaurant named Red Stripes. It's run by a couple, Lakesha and Ezron Daley. He is from Kingston, Jamaica, and she is from Daufuskie Island, South Carolina, and together they bring two parts of the African diaspora together. The dishes—from jerk chicken pot stickers to brown-stew shrimp and lobster to deviled crab and rice—reveal the range of flavors found in the region's islands.

There was also Mother Smoladin' Good, a food truck operated by Danielle and Mark Green, with one of the best barbecue experiences I've ever had. They move their trailer and grill across the area, selling pork ribs, beef ribs, beef brisket, and chicken and turkey breast. Green's Carolina mustard barbecue sauce is the perfect way to enjoy the juicy, well-seasoned meat he prepares. The truck is to be stalked more than followed, as it can be hard to pin down its exact location on any given day.

Our next stop was Daufuskie Island, which is isolated and rustic. On the ferry ride over, we saw dolphins leap into the fresh salt air. Sea island cotton once flourished on Daufuskie, but it's now a resort getaway dotted with small Black homesteads, which chef Sallie Ann Robinson, my friend and mentor, is trying to preserve. Her Authentic Gullah Tour bus regularly takes a dozen or so lucky visitors on an hour-long journey to explore the stories told in her cookbooks. (Now, of course, the tours are socially distanced and extra sanitizing measures are in place on the bus.) The proceeds support her effort to save the land belonging to the remaining Black families. If you are lucky, she will treat you to a few of her favorite dishes—blackberry dumplings, fried rabbit, deviled crab in the shell. Just don't ask her to make okra. Go on the tour, and she will tell you why.

A few other things you'll learn from Robinson: beginning in the late 1500s, Gullah-Geechee people were spread from southeastern North Carolina to (Continued on page 103)
in response to the pandemic, the chef set up an outdoor "yurt village," with 13 tented dining huts for socially distant meals. Elsewhere in the city, I had the best caramel cake, biscuits, and confections I've eaten anywhere in the South at Back in the Day Bakery, run by master pastry chefs Cheryl and Griffith Day. And Sunday brunch at Vic's on the River is where much of Savannah's best coastal soul food is served: crab soup, fried chicken, and made-to-order omelettes with Georgia blue crab alongside unforgettable macaroni and cheese.

North Charleston (less sway than its neighbor Charleston), meanwhile, has become a hub of Gullah-Geechee establishments. One of my favorites was Nana's Seafood & Soul, where you can get fried chicken, fried fish, and Gullah-style pot roast (there really is such a thing) with three options—red rice, Sea Island peas, or greens—or the famous garlic crab with shrimp, corn on the cob, and mussels.

Nigel's Good Food, run by chefs Nigel and Louise Drayton, serves stewed turkey wings that make you want all the rice and gravy in South Carolina. You'll also want to try the Geechee wings (spicy and saucy), fried green tomatoes, and salmon and grits. The next stop was My Three Sons, a place for which there is truly no substitute, with some of the best red rice that any restaurant in the area has to offer, as well as smothered pork chops that give you immediate Southern Sunday dinner nostalgia. And Shrimp & Grits, run by chef Carlos Brown in Citadel Mall, features braised short ribs with velvety grits, collard-green spring rolls, and purple-kale Caesar salad.

Lest you think it's all rich, saucy decadence, though, I should mention the Lowcountry's superb fresh produce, which sits at the center of the traditional cuisine. The farmers' markets are reason enough to rent a place with a full kitchen, as we did, and cook the superb collards, kale, and okra. We also picked up jars and preserves like peach salsa at Barefoot Farm, in Beaufort, and bought shrimp and fish at Bradley Seafood Market, in St. Helena.

Before heading back north, we stopped at the Joseph Fields Farm on Johns Island for one of BJ's pop-up lunches. In a pit surrounded by trees heavy with pecans, a goat carcass was roasting, covered by banana leaves. In pots on the ground simmered red rice, okra soup, and a coconut-water stew made with the heads of just-caught tlefish on the surface of which bobbed bright-red Scotch bonnets. Picnic tables had been set up across a field with social distancing in mind.

The ash-baked sweet potato I held in my hand was so good that I was okay with burning my fingers. The goat had absorbed the smoke of the pecan and oak woods that fired the pit, as well as the secret sauce BJ had slathered it with. The red rice was plump and just slightly toothy, cooked in the Gullah-Geechee way, passed down from West Africa—with each grain separate and distinct.

BJ seemed satisfied with his work. "That's what makes us special—nobody can do this like us," he said. "You have to be on the land and in the water to know why it's special, and you can only do that here." Three young men were cooking the food, doing their part to keep the culture alive. They shared with BJ, and everyone else there, a dedication to bringing people together with plates passed down from the past. My past, my people, and the plates that have sustained us for centuries.