

P fresh Prince

Charleston's farm-to-table hero Sean Brock is leading a revival in traditional Southern cooking. Jeffrey Steingarten pulls up a chair.
Photographed by Eric Boman.

John T. and I were discussing Sean Brock's arm, the one pictured on the opposite page. "Five years ago it seemed like every chef in the South was getting a pig tattoo," John T. recalled. "Now they're getting collard-patch half-sleeves and cornfield full-sleeves. The vegetables depicted are heirloom varieties, of course." I have examined Sean's arm in person without touching it in any way, and you can clearly identify pink-striped beets, nicely trimmed baby leeks, little rad-

ishes, what look to me to be potato flowers (though I'm no expert on potato flowers), and an ear of corn that may just be purple. Insisting on anatomical accuracy, he took seed catalogs to the tattoo artist he had engaged for his full-sleeve job.

Sean is the brilliant chef who presides over two leading restaurants in Charleston, South Carolina, namely Husk and McCrady's. He's 34, and apart from his arm, he is very pleasant in appearance, slightly shorter than average, solidly built, with brown hair and brown eyes, and a serious face that is nonetheless nearly always ready to break out laughing.

And John T. Edge is my favorite repository of knowledge and wisdom concerning Southern food. He has directed the Southern Foodways Alliance at the University of Mississippi in Oxford since its founding in 1999 and has written several of the most valuable books and magazine articles about the region's cuisine.

Why all the fuss about Southern American cooking? Only this. It is simply the finest that America has ever produced. The range of cuisines of the South as they developed until, say, the 1930s was the most varied and delicious—the most satisfying and interesting—traditional cooking of America. And many Southern chefs, Sean among them, are convinced that it can be again. The current renaissance in Southern cooking, somewhere between a movement and a trend, is a renewal, a revival, a rebirth, a recapture, retrieval, and return. It's been gathering speed for at least the past ten years and has lately neared a fever pitch. There are many styles and tastes. Leading chefs like



Frank Stitt in Birmingham, Alabama, have introduced French and Italian flavors and techniques. Southern pork barbecue has flourished throughout the country, remarkably so in places such as New York City (where seemingly reckless enthusiasm led star restaurateur Danny Meyer to erect twin chimneys fifteen stories above his ground-floor barbecue joint—as he likes to think of it—Blue Smoke). Young cooks in Cajun country in the neighborhood of Lafayette, Louisiana, are reported to be devising a refreshed version of their iconic, austere cuisine. (Austere? When the Acadians, as they are more respectfully known—though “Cajun” is no longer an insult—settled in Louisiana, they were dirt-poor, producing little to trade with the outside world, so they ate what they could grow and raise themselves and find in the rivers, and their chief spice was red pepper.) And John T. tells me that a chef in Little Rock is searching for an Arkansas cuisine worth reviving.

For years, one of my favorite cookbooks has been *The Virginia House-wife*, by Mary Randolph, first published in 1824 and by many measures the first truly American cookbook. Mrs. Randolph set down her recipes in the most direct, clear, spare, and economical prose—while still somehow causing your mouth to water as you read (reminding me of Hemingway’s delectable, adjective-free descriptions of the food he ate in Paris). But it is especially the content that I find remarkable: There are only fourteen recipes for pork but 49 for cabbage, sprouts, parsnips, sorrel, Jerusalem artichokes, okra, lima beans, field peas, salsify, onions, carrots, beets, artichokes, broccoli, peas, French beans and snaps, spinach, various squashes, eggplant, potatoes and sweet potatoes, pumpkins, and mushrooms—and this in a region that is often described as pig-obsessed by writers who have never read Mrs. Randolph. (Particularly heartening to this author is the complete and utter absence of kale, which I am fairly sure was not designed by Father Nature for human consumption, as it is bitter enough to discourage any predator, including us. I feel that the current kale craze is a violation of the Natural Order.) Locally grown vegetables were the pride of the South, and this is the meaning of Sean’s tattoo.

Sean grew up in a little town in Virginia coal country, learned to cook from his grandmother, let his hair grow, became a Deadhead, and all along idolized masterly TV chefs—Julia Child to Justin

LOCAL ROOTS

Brock’s full-sleeve tattoo depicts a bounty of heirloom vegetables.

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Wilson—who had virtually invited him into their kitchen, then moved on to the more forbidding figures on PBS's *Great Chefs* series. He attended the Johnson & Wales culinary school (at that time in Charleston), married his girlfriend, Tonya Combs, and left the city to work at a succession of positions with increasing responsibility and at better and better restaurants. In 2006 he was hired by a restaurant partnership in Charleston as the chef at McCrady's, where Sean emphasized very modern cooking methods—what some like to call “molecular gastronomy”—and in 2010 he won the James Beard Award as the best chef in the Southeast.

At the same time, Sean was becoming more intent on discovering the possibilities of Southern cooking. When I first met him (which was, oddly enough, in Japan), Sean explained that when he had tried many of the old Carolina recipes, the results were disappointingly bland. He eventually concluded that modern-day vegetables and grains must have lost the flavors and textures for which they had been prized more than a century ago. And some had disappeared altogether. Then, when the owners of McCrady's bought a small old wreck of a house in Charleston to turn into a new restaurant, Sean worked up a formal proposal to devote the place to a revival of what he considered real Southern food. Choosing a name seemed to take forever. “In the end, we all agreed on Husk,” Sean recalls. “It refers to the hard, fibrous coating that protects and preserves a seed. That seemed just right.”

With the dream of reviving this corner of Southern cooking, Sean may have an easier time of it than some other Southern chefs. From the time of its founding in 1670, Charleston and its surroundings were endowed with a fine climate for agriculture, rich and fertile soil, a productive sea-coast, an export crop in great demand—Carolina Gold rice was the long-grain variety most esteemed in the world—and the import of foreign foodstuffs traded through the bustling port. Charleston was one of America's ten largest cities before the Civil War, and much of its prosperity depended on the vast enslavement of Africans. Some had worked in rice-growing coastal regions of West Africa and were valuable as specialists, some carried with them the techniques for growing indigo, which became an important export, and slaves who had first worked on Caribbean plantations brought a cuisine more vividly and intricately flavored than the English cooking that much of America had inherited. Except for rice culture, agriculture was generally small-scale, as most plantations aimed to be self-sufficient. The abolition of slavery devastated the economy of rice farming and with it the wealth and position of Charleston.

My first dinner at Husk came a year after its November 2010 opening. I wasn't surprised to find that the menu named the suppliers of practically everything. So the first course was listed as “Salad of Arugula and Marinated Beets, GA Bleu Cheese, Candied Lady's Island Pecans, Wadmalaw Strawberry Vinaigrette,” and it was the loveliest salad I've ever seen, arranged in a rough circle on a wide, carved wooden plate, pretty

much in one layer, with arugula playing only a bit part, a much less important element than the thin slices of beets and turnips, the golden blossoms that may have been wild, the brilliant little red onions cut in half so you could see their many layers, and what appeared to be wild greens. I could hear them say, “Eat me,” and although I normally turn a deaf ear to whatever any salad may be trying to tell me, I complied, and it was extremely delightful. I might even say that it was the first salad that had ever truly moved me—actually accelerated my pulse. Can I find a salad such as this in my Manhattan?

Soon there were glistening Charleston “blade” oysters (i.e., long and thin), tasting as strong as clams and flecked with tiny green members of the plant kingdom, and a dressing brightened with ginger and bittered by sorrel. And then came a plate papered with a huge, tender lettuce leaf on which lay pig morsels as crunchy as morsels are capable of being—bacon-red, bacon-smoked, deep-fried, crosswise slices of outer ear—waiting to be wrapped in the lettuce and eaten like a handful of Beijing duck in a tender wheaten disk. And yes, next appeared a thick slice of fried green tomato, battered in cornmeal and topped with somewhere between a dollop and a gallon of “cheddar pimento”—an inexplicable Southern obsession that could still not detract from the perfection of this icon. Then an iron pot arrived with fat and juicy clams in their broth of ham and beer, and a skillet of rustic, grainy corn bread with a crisp reddish crust. (This is a famous, easy recipe. You melt some bacon fat in a cast-iron frying pan, which you plunk into a really hot oven, and when it is just as hot as the oven, you pour in a cornmeal batter and bake.) And later there were two more skillets, one with baked cheese grits and the other a mixed roast of Sea Island red peas in their green pods and red bell pepper. But first came a thick rectangle of snowy-fresh Carolina catfish rolled in cornmeal, fried with lard, and set onto a sauce of preserved tomatoes and surrounded by pickled okra, Kentucky Wonder beans, and smoky field peas. Okra is not native to America. It was brought here from Africa by slaves and became both a favorite vegetable and an ingredient for thickening gumbo. The field peas started out as fresh, speckled, beanlike legumes, and were cooked all day at a cool 145° F in the smoker under a rack of dripping meat. I had never eaten a dish in which six beans were treated with the respect typically reserved for chunks of foie gras.

Later in the meal, Sean cooked up two pieces of his excellent fried chicken, its crust closely adhering to the skin; it was not on the menu that evening, but I had requested it before arriving. And this brings me to an important point. I was obviously not dining anonymously. Sean cooked or supervised everything I ate and often delivered it himself to the table. Husk has no tasting menu, so my dinner had many more courses than did those around me. (I am not a stranger to the practice of ordering ten dishes for two, but this seems to embarrass other people, mainly laymen or laywomen.) And thus the present article is decidedly not an anonymous review.

Sean has followed several parallel paths that are all the rage these days but that rarely converge with such force in one chef. He is a locavore, and sure, Sean's cooking can also be described as "farm to table," another contemporary virtue of which so many chefs and menus boast—although Sean wouldn't bother because he goes so much further than most chefs. He often waits to see what the farms will send him before writing the day's menu, rather than depending on advance orders.

"Buy food only from people you know" is today's catchy ideal but impractical in many American cities. Sean rarely deviates from it. He buys his seafood from fishermen who themselves are expert at finding and caring for the best species from the best waters—shrimp, crabs, oysters, clams, flounder. The

bacon at Husk is Broadbent's renowned smoked country bacon; cornmeal comes only from the equally renowned Anson Mills. One day a man called Clammer Dave left his catch at the kitchen of Husk, after which he and I talked clams. Clammer Dave advised that when you cook clams, stop when only some of them have opened. And don't discard those that refuse to do so; pry their shells apart with a knife. (Years ago, Marcella Hazan told me that clams that stay shut are more alive, not less!)

Two months after my first meal at Husk, my wife, Caron, joined me in Charleston, and dinner was just as good as the first, maybe even better. New to me was a plate of pickles in many shades of green, that included unripe strawberries, ramps, and green tomatoes, and a plate of salumi made roughly on the Italian model but with no spices beyond black pepper and cayenne. Then there was a strip of wagyu beef from Texas,

from cattle said to have been raised in the woods and fed on acorns, like Spanish pigs—succulent and nicely browned. Caron and I ordered one dessert for sharing, a whole little buttermilk pie. Most examples of this iconic dessert are sweetly obvious—at best a trembling custard, like a sugary quiche. Sean's was different: deflated, less eggy, chewier, more like a rustic pastry. Sean was given the recipe by the woman who makes the buttermilk, and I've had the pleasure of tasting something like it only once before.

Charleston is a very good place to eat and not just for Southern food, to which we restricted our diet for journalistic reasons, and although nobody aims to renew Southern tradition with Sean's single-mindedness and talent, the past was present and alive on every table we visited. Robert Stehling's light and airy Hominy Grill serves up irresistible versions of familiar Southern favorites such as shrimp and grits and she-crab soup. The Peninsula Grill in the Planters Inn, popular for steak and lobsters, is deservedly famous for its scrumptious coconut cake, said to be a Charleston specialty. Martha Lou's Kitchen is a mandatory soul-food restaurant that, unlike most purveyors of that cuisine in the North, is never self-conscious. The fried chicken is very good, and the tomatoey okra soup is memorable. (My second helping, in a giant paper cup, was confiscated at the airport. Can you believe it? Doesn't this mean that the terrorists have won?)

Butcher & Bee is admired for its novel sandwiches, but the occasion for our visit was a pop-up Geechee dinner. The Gullah people, also known as Geechee, are descendants of slaves from farms on the Sea Islands and seacoast, where they remained isolated, keeping their distinctive ways and their language. This is now a source of pride, said to unite a pidgin English vocabulary with African sentence structure and syntax. The Br'er Rabbit stories were originally told in Gullah: Justice Clarence Thomas has written that his often-derided practice of not asking questions during Supreme Court arguments originated with his childhood embarrassment at speaking with a strong Gullah accent when he first attended a white school. I wish I had known about Alphonso Brown's *A Gullah Guide to Charleston* before I returned home.

Our exceedingly savory “Gullah/Geechee Sunday Supper,” as the blackboard menu called it, was nicely cooked by visiting chef Benjamin “BJ” Dennis, whose ancestors come from a Geechee community on Daniel Island. We ate Geechee-Boy Grits with crab butter, local oysters, and conch, shark steak (a Gullah staple) with sweet and hot peppers, lima beans and ground peanuts stewed in coconut milk, green beans braised with smoked pork, and baked spring squash with “creole sauce.”

One day we drove with Sean and Tonya to the idyllic Thornhill Farm, which supplies about 50 percent of Sean’s vegetables. On one and a half acres, Sean may plant whatever he wishes, and it was here that we had a real Low Country farming experience. Sean had brought a plastic quart container containing little red beans, which he treated as though they were gems, except you don’t push gems into the earth, which is what we were meant to do, in infinitely long rows under the punishing April sun. The rare Sea Island White Flint Corn, which Sean had already planted, was now peeping out above the earth. The idea was to bury the little dark red beans, Purple Capes, alongside the corn, so that when both reach adolescence, the bean stalks can climb the cornstalks and not require wooden stakes. The process was not conceptually

difficult, and I felt I had mastered it after only three beans, so I left Sean and Caron to complete the hour-long task while I turned to my journalistic duties, interviewing three 20-something girl volunteers, one of whom was on her way to the Peace Corps in Zambia.

There are those who question the culinary value in Sean’s fondness for antique varieties of grains and vegetables. The climate has changed, they say, the soil has changed, the people have changed, and alternatives are available that weren’t 200 or 300 years ago. I’ve read the scattered opinion, not the consensus, that some of Sean’s dishes are good to eat only if you know the lengthy story behind them. And I’ve eaten heirloom vegetables that simply remind me why they were lost in the first place.

None of this applies to Sean—none of it. Of all the mouthfuls of Sean’s cooking I’ve eaten, there was only one I didn’t find delicious, and that one was overrun with kale. Sean is a very good cook, a natural cook and rigorously trained, and he doesn’t serve precious food or ideological food. The story simply may help you understand some Southern dishes that had eluded you. For instance, hopping John is an iconic Carolina dish, mandatory at New Year’s, of which I’ve never been able to eat more than a few forkfuls—until I tasted Sean’s version. And charming as Sean’s story is about the origins of his

butter-milk pie, I might possibly have been able to finish off a dozen or so slices before launching an investigation into why it tasted so good.

Sean’s Southern dreams stretch far into the future. He’s already begun thinking hard about recapturing the cooking of southern Appalachia, where he grew up. He has spoken with a food historian or two, but he feels that he must spend time there, before the old ways have completely disappeared. □

