Grits Gone Wild

Like Tuscany in the 1980s and California in the late 1990s, the American South is in the grips of an epic culinary boom. Adam Platt’s plan? Start in Tennessee and slowly eat his way east until, like General Sherman, he reached the sea.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
Peter Frank Edwards
I'd been on the road for a day or two, packing to and fro among the nouveau food snobs destinationised backwoods Tennessee, before I met the main gourmets chefs in tony Yankee-style restaurants call the Jock Star of Country Ham. During the course of my travels, I'd already tasted "hand-wrapped" and with chocolate touched with barrel-aged bourbon and discussed the merits of the corn bread made with several bouchousious self-proclaimed food snobs from Nashville. I'd stood in line for a taste on the extremely addictive Prince's "hot" fried chicken and paid one hundred dollars for an elaborate eleven-course tasting menu that included a strange, inimitating substance called Wonder Bread Purée. I'd visited an artisanal "seed saver" who travels the mountain valleys looking for ancient beans and strains of corn, and sat at the bar of a little barbecue joint in Nolensville, Tennessee, contemplating the big Momma Sampler, an impressive local specialty that includes a pile of barbecued pork products roughly the size of my head.

The Rock Star of Country Ham received me in his smoke-tinted office, which contains a desk cluttered with papers and old stuffing pens, an ancient push-button telephone, and weathered laminate walls the color of tobacco. "I tell people it's not a huge box, and that's not far from the truth," said Allan Benton, with a friendly grin. Benton grew up on a backwoods farm in the Appalachians of southeastern Virginia and moved to Tennessee to be a teacher. After deciding that he couldn't subsist on his meager salary, he bought a small smokehouse and began curing hams in a mixture of salt and brown sugar, the way his parents did on their mountain farm. He flavored them for days in clouds of hickory smoke. "For years my customers were a few local hillbillies and a couple of greasy spoon restaurants up in the mountains," said Benton, who has operated out of the same cider mill building off Highway 41, near Madisonville, Kentucky, for the last thirty years. Benton's fortunes changed a decade ago, when the chef at a nearby resort called Blackberry Farm began serving hickory-smoked Benton ham and bacon to his guests for breakfast. The future Top Chef judge Tom Colicchio tasted it there and began serving plates of Benton's country ham at his in jail New York restaurant Craft. To his amazement, Benton now ships his hams and slabs of smoked country bacon to all fifty states. He entertains food pilgrims from far-off places like Munich, Puerto Rico, and New York City. "We get the food people coming from all over," he said as we wandered toward the belching smoker, which he tends himself seven days a week. "I've never in a million years thought high rollers in white-tablecloth restaurants would want a taste of my hillbilly ham. Now I'm a bit of a foodie myself."
Any concerns about not getting enough to eat disappeared around

course number six—wagyu beef.
I dimly recall, infused with a sweet hint of smoke,
like some strange, ethereal version of beef barbecue.
The Nashville dandy sitting next to me took one dainty bite of this curious dish and then another. "This is freaking excellent!" he said. These were more or less my sentiments.

... CRANKBAIL SLUDGE Cliché, but it sounds like a joke about preconceptions of Southern food—the chicken skin at the Carnival Seat are served with dumplings and the Wonder Brand Parfait—but you won’t hear any complaints.

... places. Like Tuscany in the ’80s and California a decade ago, the American South is in the grip of what one cultured gastrone in the food-obsessed city of Charleston described to me as "a culinary boom of epic proportions." Young chefs in former gour-met backwaters like Charleston and Athens, Georgia, are penning glossy coffee table cookbooks and demonstrating their recipes for corn bread to adoring audiences on national TV. In the great gus-tronomic capital of the south, fancy food snobs who once preoccupied themselves with dishes like foie gras and purrly French soufflés are exchanging recipes for fried chicken and quabbling over the merits of various increasingly pricey Kentucky bourbons.

... There are rice smocks in the newly food-conscious States of America, barbecue snobs, pimento cheese smocks, grits snobs, and pork snobs who specialize in making delicate strips of prosciutto out of antique breeds of feral pig. In the last few years, discerning gourmets from up north have been canceling their reservations to panel food destinations like Napa Valley and Provence and making pilgrimages down South to attend fancy food festivals, nibbling delicately on regional specialties like fried green tomatoes, and deconstruct recipes for that Charleston New Year’s specialty, Hoppin’ John.

... AS A PROFESSIONAL RESTAURANT CRITIC AND CARD-carrying Yankee food snob, I’d dined around the world, in New York, Tokyo, and the great food capitals of Europe and Asia. But now it was my turn to experience the wonders of this unlikely gastronomic revolution. I wanted to taste the perfect Carolina oyster, to addle myself with nouveau-gourmet versions of pork and beans and fried chicken, and to delve into the sophisticated pleasures of a real buttermilk biscuit. I’d prepared for my trip by going on a monthlong diet. I’d read up on the ever-expanding canon of trendy cookbooks that have been pouring out of Dixie recently the way trendy cookbooks used to come out of Paris and Rome. I’d quizzed chefs on the special places they went to eat during their foraging trips down South, and I’d even cultivated a scrappy Colonel Sanders-style goatee for the occasion.

... It was my idea to pic a spot in the middle of what one of my New York gastronome friends fondly calls the Land Belt and then eat my way slowly east until, like General Sherman, I reached the sea. I decided to begin my travels in Nashville, a town that is filled with fashionable new restaurants but that also has its own dining pedigree. From there, I’d drive to Blackberry Farm, in Walland, Tennessee, where guests pay a thousand dol-
"I raised chickens, but they're too puny," said one farmer.
"I raised sheep, but they're stupid. Now look at the pig. The pig is intelligent.
There's a fan club for every part of the animal. Everybody loves the pig!"
PLACEs & PRICES

Just Like Mama Used to Make

As an other great countryณ

This is the home of the

Butterfish Farm

At The Inn, in New York

The dishes he absolutely loved

such as a riff on Tater "ips" that
includes online

Martins’ BBQ三种price

Bonald’s Smokehouse

the Aspen Times

The dishes he absolutely loved

92

NASHVILLE and

as well as fried chicken

the Hertitage Hotel.

Tater Tots" served with horseradish
dill cream. Their latest venture is the Cathead Bar, a
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