

## Editor's Column

# Hanging with Chefs

IN 2014, CORNELIA BAILEY APPROACHED DAVID SHIELDS WITH AN URGENT request. She and her neighbors in Hog Hammock, a slave-descended Geechee community on Sapelo Island, Georgia, were about to lose their homes thanks to skyrocketing property taxes engineered by developers. To generate income they had tried to market one of the island's specialties, the red pea, but it wasn't enough. Could another crop be added, perhaps one with a bigger market?

Bailey knew she was dealing with an unusual English professor. The author of many books on civil society, including *Southern Provisions: The Creation and Revival of a Cuisine* (2015), Shields regularly spends time with geneticists, entomologists, and soil scientists. The literature that he reads includes seed catalogs, agricultural journals, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century treatises on plant breeding, and manuals on pomology and geponics. Farm ecology, seed variety, and soil chemistry are all part of his "philological research" (Shields).

All sorts of people go to Shields for help. In 2003, after attending the conference *Cuisines of the Lowcountry and the Caribbean*, Glenn Roberts, CEO of Anson Mills, came up with an idea that would give new meaning to fieldwork. Knowing that the rice-centered cuisine of the global South would flourish only if the lost classic, the Carolina Gold, were to be restored, Roberts proposed to Shields that they create a seed-recovery project comparable to Native Seeds / SEARCH, a seed-conservation project based in Arizona.<sup>1</sup> The hope was to bring back not only the once abundant but now vanished Carolina Gold but also "the rotation crops, co-crops, provision crops, forage crops" that make this cuisine possible (Shields). Archival research was needed and Shields was the one to do it.

Two and a half years later, the bleary-eyed researcher emerged from the microfilm bunker of the Thomas Cooper Library at the University



**FIG. 1**

Jerome Dixon and Doc Bill Thomas, owners of Georgia Coastal Gourmet Farms, with sugarcane seedlings. Image courtesy of Georgia Coastal Gourmet Farms.

of South Carolina, ready to go into the field. With Roberts, Shields founded the Carolina Gold Rice Foundation, a nonprofit organization dedicated to the restoration of lost grains in all their variety and “in some semblance of their original soil context”—an alternative to the “genetic sameness” of commercially cloned crops, grown in sterile soil and under a standard regimen of chemical fertilizers and pesticides (Shields). Unsullied by these petroleum derivatives and boosted by “old growing schemes and rotations to make the soil as alive as possible,” restored grains are more nutritious and taste better. Their distinctive flavor comes from the interactions of their “complex root systems” with the “microbial universe in living soil, with mycorrhizas, with minerals.” Flavor is a deep ecological effect, Shields says, not a passing sensation but long-running and memory-laden, a chemical signature stemming from a “whole-body uptake of energy.”

A history-conscious, ingredient-recovering cuisine is the logical outcome of the foundation's work. Not surprisingly, regional chefs have become the foundation's staunch allies: they are the ones with gut-level outreach, turning archival research into delectable mouthfuls, a public humanities with taste, texture, and aroma. Fieldwork is probably always collaborative; it's especially so in this case. With the Gullah chef B. J.

Dennis, Shields traveled to Trinidad looking for West African rice and benne, an heirloom sesame. The foundation also found and restored the lost Catawba flour corn, while working with the Mohawk chef Dave Smoke-McCluskey to explore the culinary possibilities of maize and chestnut. It gives away seeds for free. JuneBaby, Eduardo Jordon's soul-food restaurant in Seattle, winner of the 2018 Best New Restaurant award, is a recipient of those seeds. Sean Brock, a James Beard Award-winning chef and vocal fan, named his restaurant Husk in tribute to the

whole-body flavor of these grains.

When Bailey showed up in 2014, Shields was steeped in fieldwork and ready for more. With a team from the foundation, he traveled to Sapelo Island to reconstruct the key ingredients in its once flourishing plantation economy. He already knew—from a group project that he undertook with the students in his class *Southern Foodways*—that somewhere a variety of sugarcane had been cultivated on such a scale and precipitated such a drop in sugar prices that it transformed the national palate in the 1820s. Where had it come from? To his surprise, philological research revealed that the epicenter was none other than Sapelo Island itself. Its staple crop, the Purple Ribbon sugarcane, brought to Georgia and Louisiana from St. Croix in 1814, produced such a glut of cheap granulated sugar that vinegars and pickles and jams and jellies would never be the same again.

Disease swept across the region in the early 1900s, wiping out the cane fields and much of the sugar industry. When the United States government helped with the replanting, hybrids, chosen for their disease resistance rather than their flavor, soon supplanted the Purple Ribbon (“Ark”). By the twenty-first century, there was no certified descendant of the original strain. Still, through dogged

research, molecular forensic testing, and the two-hundred-year-old inherited knowledge of the black organic farmers Jerome Dixon and William “Doc Bill” Thomas, a trial-and-error experiment got off the ground. Eighty-four candidates, some existing varieties and some the result of back-breeding, were hand-planted at Georgia Coastal Gourmet Farms in 2015 (fig. 1).

Hurricane Irma almost destroyed the entire lot in 2017, but enough survived that the first batch of cane syrup from the initial planting made it to the market that fall. Instantly sold out, it soon caught the attention of Linton Hopkins, the acclaimed “serial” chef and CEO of six restaurants in Atlanta.<sup>2</sup> His pecan pie suddenly becomes a culinary adventure (fig. 2). Brock, meanwhile, could barely restrain himself from hyperbole on *Twitter*. The Purple Ribbon syrup, he said, “has an intoxicating aroma of Perigord Black truffles. Easily one of the most exciting and delectable things I’ve ever tasted” (qtd. in “Welcome”).

Pecan pies and Perigord black truffles might turn out to be only the first steps in a pathbreaking project, every bit as consequential as its previous incarnation in the nineteenth century. As climate change increasingly dominates the global economy, the future of Purple Ribbon might lie as much in the low-carbon biofuel sector as in restaurants. If flavor is a “whole-body uptake of energy,” as Shields says, the owners of Georgia Coastal Gourmet Farms have every intention of literalizing it as they experiment with a staple crop simultaneously anchoring a food system and an energy system. “Southern cane may power more than kitchens; it could provide energy for entire homes,” Dixon hopes (Taylor).

The idea is not as farfetched as it might seem. For decades Brazil has been fermenting cane juice to make alcohol-based biofuel, which produces twelve percent fewer greenhouse gas emissions than fossil fuel. In 2017, new research published on the *Smithsonian* Web site showed that a genetically engineered



FIG. 2

Pecan pie made with Sapelo Purple Ribbon Sugar Cane syrup. Image courtesy of Georgia Coastal Gourmet Farms.

variety (lipidcane) could further reduce emissions by forty-one percent. Yet another dual-purpose cane (energycane) promises to emit even less greenhouse gas (Kumar et al.). Oil companies are paying attention. On 22 July 2019, BP announced that it was launching a joint venture with the agricultural trader Bunge. Together, these two will operate eleven plants in Brazil with the capacity to crush thirty-two million tons of cane per year, making the energy giant the world’s third-largest cane processor (McFarlane; Teixeira).

Shields, Bailey, Dixon, and Thomas will not be operating on that scale. And they don’t have to. The kind of trial-and-error experiment that they devote themselves to is site-specific and scale-elastic. It allows even those with modest resources to have nontrivial input into global energy protocols. Agency here is horizontally and peripherally distributed, creating alliances across races, genders, and classes. Vigorous in its future orientation, this kind of experiment also brings immediate satisfactions in everyday life. For scholars used to solitary labor, it provides a much-needed outlet, a laboratory translating philological research into tangible outcomes in the public arena. Fieldwork, in this sense, is shorthand for scholarly work aspiring to flourish in a nonscholarly world: a humanities necessarily collaborative and experimental, speaking to our shared pleasures and excitements as a public-facing discipline.

This humanities is already beginning to have a big impact on undergraduate

education. The food studies minor at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), is a case in point (Lukianchikov). Proposed in December 2015 by Joseph Nagy, a professor of English, the minor now has over one hundred students drawn from the life sciences and social sciences, as well as English (Pautler; Carruth [11 July]). Its gateway course, Food: A Lens on Environment and Sustainability, is team-taught by four faculty members from across the campus. Marcie Rothman, a chef, cookbook author, and UCLA alumna, has endowed the program (“Marcie Rothman Scholarship”). A teaching-and-learning kitchen, under construction, will serve the entire university, allowing for chef residencies and hands-on experimentation by undergraduates.

Adding to these efforts, Allison Carruth, associate professor of English and chair of Food Studies at UCLA, recently teamed up with the New York artist Marina Zurkow and the Los Angeles culinary duo Hank and Bean (Henry Fischer and Anna Rose Hopkins) to publicize their joint project Making the Best of It: Nimble Foods for Climate Chaos (“Nimble Foods”). What does it take for food to be “nimble” in an age of floods and droughts, extreme temperatures, wild fires, and pandemics? For Hank and Bean, nimbleness means availing ourselves of overlooked proteins, developing foraging techniques, and turning climate-emboldened invasive species into handy food items. The hope is to broaden our palate and educate the public about climate disruptions and the future of food, as well as to highlight alternatives to unsustainable meat diets and redefine the “edible” by creating experimental recipes.<sup>3</sup>

The first phase of Making the Best of It took the form of a series of tasting events in 2018–19, showcasing the project’s experimental foods across the UCLA campus and at strategic sites around Los Angeles. The key ingredient here was jellyfish, made into a variety of snacks, including jerky, instant soups, noodles, cookies, and jellies. Team members

were on hand to initiate conversations about the dangers of climate change, the vulnerabilities of conventional food systems, and the need for broad-based innovations. In the next phase, the team will seek funding to develop a street-ready mobile food-service unit for the city, comprising an electric minitruck and a close-range drone that will deliver the snacks. The drone will be designed to resemble an undersea diving vehicle mimicking the undulations of jellyfish (Carruth [12 July]).

Relatively unchanged since the Precambrian era, jellyfish today are significant to fisheries in the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific and to food markets and culinary traditions across Southeast Asia. They are tasteless and therefore exceptionally versatile as a base protein for diverse recipes and techniques. With climate change, many species of jellyfish have become invasive, threatening marine populations as well as human swimmers around the world (Chabin). Their culinary uses highlight the role of the imagination—and hence the role of the humanities—in the future of food, suggesting that precarity and experimentation can be fruitfully intertwined.

Making the Best of It generated enough interest to win Hank and Bean a spot on the new PBS show *Broken Bread* in June 2019 (“Future”). Produced by KCET, the PBS station in Los Angeles, and hosted by Roy Choi, the beloved Korean American chef known for his Kogi food truck (“Alumni Bio”), the program showcases unusual menus across Los Angeles. The episode that featured Hank and Bean also included Ethan Brown, CEO of Beyond Meat, and Vegan Hooligans, a restaurant serving an eastside Los Angeles clientele apparently converted to plant-based diner food.

As bespoke chefs, Hank and Bean curate meals for discriminating patrons willing to pay a hefty fee. For PBS, they served up raw jellyfish wrapped in lettuce, cricket bread, and a salad made with a local succulent, ice plant, one of the top ten invasive species in Los Angeles (fig. 3). Did any of this taste

good? Interviewed on NPR, Choi reluctantly admitted, “Well, no.” It was a trial-and-error experiment, after all. There was no need to get everything right the first time around. What’s clear is that more will be coming our way, more eye-popping menus cooked up by Hank and Bean and other chefs, not afraid to take small professional risks at a time when large-scale risks have become the global norm.

Meanwhile, back at UCLA, students from Carruth’s lecture class are waxing eloquent about the free snacks created by Hank and Bean in collaboration with their professor and Zurkow. One of them, noting the long line of people waiting to try the jerky, writes in an online post that “the concept of looking to invasive species as a non-traditional food source is very compelling, and I could see that being a part of a major change in the American diet in the next few decades. I was surprised by how salty and chewy the jellyfish were, and found that the edible succulent tasted quite good with sugar.” Another student, also a fan of the ice plant, said that “this was a really cool approach to the problems that invasive species pose by making a snack out of weeds!” A third student, not entirely sold on the jellyfish, said, “[T]he texture was pretty strange, but I really like the banana ketchup jellyfish combination. . . . [T]his brings up such an important issue of jellyfish overpopulation. What if there was some way to get the nature of capitalism to work in the environment’s favor?” (qtd. in Carruth [12 July]).

Clearly, these students have been fired up. Some of them will no doubt go on to become entrepreneurs like Brown, whose Beyond Meat start-up stunned the world when its share price surged 163% on 2 May 2019, its first day of trading, putting the company’s value at a whopping \$3.8 billion and making it the best IPO of the year (Popper). What other futures await students like Carruth’s, immersed

in a humanities attentive to food: what we eat, where it comes from, how it is produced, and what ecosystem it serves? I’d like to end by profiling one student educated in this way, not quite shaking up Wall Street just yet but inspired enough by what she has learned to become a pioneer while still in college.

Coming to Dartmouth College from the Blackfeet Indian Reservation in Browning, Montana, Shelbi Fitzpatrick, class of 2019, has always wondered “what food and energy systems in Indian country could look like if the Blackfeet Nation were truly food-sovereign.” A double major in environmental studies and Native American studies, she decided to use the school’s two-hundred-fiftieth anniversary as an occasion for a three-day conference on indigenous food, “something that has never really been done before at Dartmouth”—or indeed at any college or university in the United States (Fitzpatrick). To bring this off, collaboration with non-Native American students was crucial; Fitzpatrick worked closely with Arthur “Benny” Adapon, class of 2019, originally from the Philippines. Seeing food “through an environmental justice lens,” Adapon noted that “[c]onversations around climate change have to center on the lives and experiences and knowledge of native people,” who “have been stewards of their lands since time immemorial” (qtd. in Albright).

The Food Sovereignty Conference began on 20 May 2019 with a screening of *Waaki*



Fig. 3

A snack of raw jellyfish created by Hank and Bean. Image courtesy of KCET and Tastemade.

("Maize"), a documentary by the Hopi filmmaker and artist Victor Masayesva, showcasing the world community revolving around corn. Two days of packed events followed, including guided tours of indigenous artifacts at the Hood Art Museum and of Abenaki growing practices at the Dartmouth Organic Farm; a panel of Dartmouth students and alumni speaking about food ecologies among the Navajo, Hopi, and Tlingit; a workshop with Ross Racine, a soil conservationist and executive director of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, discussing the future of food through his work with the Intertribal Agricultural Council; and appearances by a trio of chefs: Sean Sherman, Valerie Segrest, and Liz Charlebois ("Food Sovereignty Conference").

Known throughout the world as the founder and CEO of the Sioux Chef, a team of Anishinaabe, Cheyenne, Dakota, Navajo, and Oglala Lakota ethnobotanists, foragers, caterers, and food-truckers, Sherman was awarded the 2018 James Beard Medal for his cookbook *The Sioux Chef's Indigenous Kitchen*. Media attention has given him an advocacy platform for precontact cuisines, including an alternative Thanksgiving dinner featuring foraged ingredients such as cactus fruit, cattails, manzanita berries, morels, rosehips, and sunchoke (Sherman). For the Dartmouth conference, Sherman prepared a "keynote dinner" reflecting the local ingredients used by the Abenaki and the Narragansett, including quahog, crayfish, pawpaw, fiddleheads, and ramps.<sup>4</sup>

Segrest, a Muckleshoot chef from the Pacific Northwest and the author of many books, including *Feeding Seven Generations: A Salish Cookbook*, used her keynote address to highlight the extent to which food and futurity are one within the indigenous cosmos. To be dedicated to food is to be dedicated to a time frame extending to generations of the unborn. The conference wrapped up with a closing feast prepared entirely by students and coordinated by Charlebois, an Abenaki chef whose perspective on food is profoundly shaped by

the seed library she has been keeping since 2013, at the Mt. Kearsarge Indian Museum in New Hampshire (Reed). There is indeed nothing more important to the future of the planet and the future of the human species than seeds.<sup>5</sup> It makes sense that those most inspired by them are the next generation, those who are redefining the humanities, bringing new meaning and new urgency to fieldwork.

*Wai Chee Dimock*

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## NOTES

1. Native Seeds / SEARCH was created in 1983 to "conserve and promote the arid-adapted crop diversity of the Southwest in support of sustainable farming and food security" ("Our Story").

2. Hopkins is known for running a succession of restaurants in Atlanta and is now executive chef and co-owner of Restaurant Eugene, Holeman and Finch Public House, Holeman and Finch Bottle Shop, H&F Burger, Hop's Chicken, and C. Ellet's Steakhouse.

3. A report released in August 2019 by the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change predicts that severe food shortages will occur simultaneously on several continents if we do not modify our meat-based diets (Schiermeier).

4. The keynote dinner, *Kikas: Feast of the Planting Moon*, consisted of four courses: quahog, pawpaw broth, dried crayfish, and dried strawberry; nixtamalized steamed corn, dried ramps, rosehip sauce, and pea shoots; venison and smoked mushroom, sunchoke, dandelion pesto, and fiddleheads; and sunflower seed tart, sweet squash, maple seeds, and fresh berries.

5. Perhaps the best-known seed library is the Svalbard Global Seed Vault in Norway ([www.seedvault.no/](http://www.seedvault.no/)).

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