

Marcie Cohen Ferris, *The Edible South: The Power of Food and the Making of an American Region*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014. 477 pp.

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The ‘central purpose’ of Marcie Cohen Ferris’s *The Edible South* is ‘to explore the meaning and influence of food in southern history’ (ix). Ferris’s interdisciplinary exploration, based on many primary sources (diaries, newspapers, cookbooks) and a growing body of secondary works, is comprehensive, in terms of chronology, race, and class.

Part I describes southern food history in the mid-nineteenth century. Meals on antebellum plantations were lavish, especially when there was an opportunity to entertain. Dinners with ‘multiple courses of soup, fish, several meats, vegetable side dishes, pickled items, and many desserts’ (15) were appreciated by most guests (though some, such as the northern-born governesses, were often put off by the ostentatious display). But there have always been two Souths: the slaves who grew and made the food had to make do with much less, of course, as did poorer whites. The class issue became painfully clear during the Civil War, when shortages led women to riot and rob in an effort to feed their children.

Part II of the book covers the decades between Reconstruction and the 1950s. Cotton production actually increased in the late nineteenth century (despite Henry Grady’s call for a diversified agriculture), and tenancy, the labor system that replaced slavery, made it almost impossible for farmers to grow anything else. The result was the classic southern diet of the three M’s—meat (salt pork), meal (cornmeal), and molasses—and the classic southern disease of pellagra, brought on by a niacin-deficient diet and causing diarrhea, dermatitis, dementia, and, if untreated for several years, death.

Pellagra prevention (pushing lean meat, eggs, beans, and fresh vegetables) was just part of a huge movement to reform southern dietary practices in the twentieth century. The Hindman Settlement School, in the mountains of Kentucky, and the Penn School, near coastal Beaufort, South Carolina, were two of the many efforts to teach

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home economics to southerners—and especially to poor, rural southerners. Demonstration and extension agents, sent out by the states' land-grant universities, took the message about nutrition and modern cooking techniques directly to the people in a number of creative and more or less efficient ways. As Ferris points out, there were numerous racial and class aspects to this work. Several New Deal programs documented the dietary issues of the region that President Franklin Roosevelt called 'the Nation's No. 1 economic problem' in the 1930s.

In the New South, culinary visions of the Old appeared at the same time as the stone monuments that the United Daughters of the Confederacy were busy raising. Old times there were not forgotten, nor could they be, with advertisements for Aunt Lody's Yams ('Lody know dese are the bestest taters'), White Lily flour, and other 'Dixie brands.' Cookbooks, 'laced with racial nostalgia, . . . reinforced white authority in a modernizing South' (202). The menu of Chapel Hill's Carolina Inn asserted that 'the Old South . . . God bless it and keep it . . . is not altogether gone with the wind' (211). By the early twentieth century, boosters attracted tourists by playing up southern cuisines: the southern hospitality of aristocratic Charleston, the 'hillbilly vittles' of the mountain South, and the Cajun cooking of New Orleans.

Part III begins with a chapter on food and the Civil Rights movement ('I'm Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table'), a fascinating compilation of stories, most of them already well-known to readers, but brought together here in a fresh light. There is a short section on the difficulties faced by African Americans who had to eat while traveling on the road. There's Georgia Gilmore, who fed participants in the Selma to Montgomery march. There are the lunch counter sit-ins, in Greensboro, Chapel Hill, and elsewhere. Paschal's Restaurant, in Atlanta, was known as "the kitchen of the civil rights movement," because this is where leaders gathered to plan events and to celebrate victories. Paschal's was famous for, among other things, fried chicken, as was another Atlanta diner: the Pickrick, managed by arch-segregationist Lester Maddox, who stood in the doorway of the restaurant, armed with a pickaxe handle, to keep African Americans out. Maddox lost a legal challenge to halt enforcement of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, as did Ollie's Bar-B-Que in Birmingham. Maddox closed the Pickrick rather than integrate; Ollie's stayed open, serving an integrated clientele until it closed 2001.

President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty recognized that some things had not changed since the 1930s. The trio of diabetes, hypertension, and obesity replaced pellagra as the major diet-induced disease of the poor South. Meanwhile, food played an important role in the emerging southern countercultural movement of the 1960s and later. 'Back-to-the-landers,' co-ops, and macrobiotic stores often found common cause

with other progressive campaigns in the South, and they set the stage for the nouvelle southern cuisine, its writers (John Egerton, Nathalie DuPree), and its chefs (Bill Neal, Edna Lewis, and others).

One might say that Ferris's book is like a pond: broad, but not very deep. One could point out that many huge topics are covered in tantalizing snippets of a few paragraphs without the layers of analysis that one might expect to see in a book from a respected university press. Such an assertion, while true, misses the point. *The Edible South* is not a monograph or an academic article. Ferris knows the scholarly literature, and she cites much of it in her sixty-five pages of endnotes. Rather, the book is an overview, a collection of details and examples with enough interpretation to show that southern foodways is more than the food on the table. 'Food stands at the center of southern history and culture' (333), she writes in her conclusion, and after reading this book, one would have to agree.