

True Grits

In Charleston, a quest to revive authentic Southern cooking.

[Burkhard Bilger](#) October 31, 2011 Issue

No man loves pigs more than Homer Sean Brock. He has bred them, raised them, and played with their young, roasted them, braised them, and smoked them whole in a pit. He has deep-fried pigs' ears and turned lard into caramel, freeze-dried pork fat and grated it onto funnel cakes. At McCrady's and Husk, the two restaurants in Charleston, South Carolina, where Brock is the executive chef, every spare shelf and walk-in has been commandeered for pork. His country hams, hung for a minimum of eighteen months, are guarded, like a twelve-year-old's comic books, by a scrawled cardboard sign: "Don't Fucking Touch."

Brock is a Southern chef, so his obsession is understandable. The South is a land of "bacon stomachs," the Portuguese diplomat Abbé Correia declared, after touring Virginia and the Carolinas in the early eighteenth century. And, despite war and industrialization, diet fads and the Great Migration, not much has changed. Pork fat is still the irreducible quantum of Southern cuisine—"that precious essence," as one Virginian wrote in 1822, "which titillates so exquisitely the papillae of the tongue." When Brock first gave me a tour of his kitchen at McCrady's, he held a blackened lump of some kind under my nose. "Smell this," he said. "It's awesome." I closed my eyes and took a deep whiff, but smelled only soot. "It's a pork bone," he said, grinning. His cooks had turned it into charcoal the day before and would use it to grill still more pigs that night. Pork-roasted pork: what could be better?

Brock, who is thirty-three, grew up in the coalfields of Virginia, not far from the Kentucky border. He had such a thick country drawl as a boy that kids made fun of it when he moved to West Virginia—"That's when you know that you're *really* a hillbilly," he told me. And though he lost the

accent sometime around culinary school, he still doesn't look or act much like a celebrity chef. Short and barrel-chested, he wears a baseball cap and a T-shirt in the kitchen and keeps a stash of Slim Jims at his desk. He has small, keen eyes embedded in pink cheeks and seems to have absorbed the best qualities of his livestock. There is a placidity and a watchfulness about him, a deep contentedness when feeding, and a braying outrage when his territory is threatened. "I feel like this sometimes," he told me, holding up a picture on his iPhone. It showed an angry Ossabaw hog about to charge.

Ossabaws are Brock's favorite pigs, and a key to his culinary predilections. Their ancestors were brought to the New World by Spanish explorers in the fifteen-hundreds, dumped on the Sea Islands off the coast of Georgia, and left to fend for themselves. With too little food to sustain them, they were downsized by natural selection—a process known as insular dwarfism—and their metabolism was repurposed for stockpiling calories. Five centuries later, they've grown into ornery, genetically suspect beasts. Their hides are mottled and hairy, their heads crowned by raffish Mohawks. ("Now, that's how a pig should look!" Brock said.) Their only real attraction lies beneath the skin: Ossabaws produce more lard per pound than any other pig. Their torpedo-shaped bellies, propped on toothpicky legs, are surmounted by a thick ridge of the finest fatback, sweetened by congenital diabetes. Brock likens it to cotton candy.

Pigs like this are what Southern food has been missing, he says. Where most modern breeds are engineered for maximum meat at the expense of fat and flavor, the Ossabaw is blissfully unimproved. Its pork tastes like pork, not some chewier version of chicken. Granted, we've heard claims like this before. It's hard to find an espresso bar or bistro that doesn't proclaim the provenance of every artisanal bean and heirloom pork chop. But Brock has deeper concerns. In his kitchens, breeds like the Ossabaw are just the beginning of a grand culinary reclamation project—a painstaking revival of what was once America's greatest cuisine, all but lost in the twentieth century. In the past few years, Brock and a small

group of local historians, plant geneticists, and farmers have reintroduced dozens of heirloom greens and grains, many of them untasted since the eighteenth-century. "We need to be eating this stuff," he told me. "It needs to be in every chef's vocabulary. I want people to see how beautiful Southern food is—whatever it takes. I feel like I was put on earth to preach that gospel."

Southern food has had no lack of would-be saviors, but it has proved mulishly resistant to change. When I was growing up in Oklahoma, at the far western edge of the former Confederacy, the more authentic the dish the less tasty it tended to be: watery grits, sulfury collard greens, strips of chicken-fried gristle sandwiched in shaggy carpets of breading. Corn bread and barbecue were great, as long as they were sweet, and I always loved deep-fried okra. But there didn't seem to be much hope for the rest. The worst knocks against Southern food—that it was heavy, fatty, bland, and simple-minded, long on fried meat and short on vegetables—were what people loved best about it.

Brock's genius is to have it both ways. His restaurants are like cleverly argued revisionist histories: they appeal to your nostalgia while reversing your expectations. McCrady's, housed in an eighteenth-century brick tavern, is devoted to the arcane craft of molecular gastronomy. The dishes are laced with local oddities like cattails and pokeweed but inspired by the high-tech wizardry of chefs like Grant Achatz. Husk, which occupies a matronly Victorian four blocks away, is a more rustic affair. When Brock opened it, last year, he vowed to use no ingredient from north of the Mason-Dixon Line. The olive oil is from southern Texas, the mustard greens from land that Brock helps farm, the recipes drawn from his collection of historical diaries and cookbooks. At Husk, Brock is re-creating what Southern food once was. At McCrady's, he's showing what it could be.

The setup seems to mirror the oldest divide in Southern culture: between slave cabin and big house, pot likker and plantation sideboard—between eating low on the hog (meaning pigs' feet) and high on the hog (meaning

tenderloin). But Brock is really trying to blur those distinctions. In the past twenty years, historians like Karen Hess have unearthed the African roots of even the fanciest plantation fare. And facsimile cookbooks such as “The Virginia Housewife” have shown the quirky industriousness of early kitchens. (“Have a large head cleaned nicely without taking off the skin,” the recipe for Mock Turtle Soup of Calf’s Head begins; it ends by noting that “the eyes are a great delicacy.”) Yet their work has never quite sparked a revival. Dishes like Frogmore Stew (no frogs—just shrimp, sausage, potatoes, and corn) and Chicken Bog (no bog—just chicken, sausage, and rice) taste less interesting than they sound.

The problem isn’t the recipes, Brock says; it’s the ingredients. He remembers getting his first taste of Hoppin’ John—the iconic dish of cowpeas and rice—when he was a student at the Johnson & Wales culinary school, in Charleston, in the late nineties. “I’d heard about it and read about it and I was excited to try it,” he told me. “It was awful.” The black-eyed peas were chalky, the rice tasted like cardboard. By then, most chefs could find ripe organic ingredients for almost any dish. But the true glories of Southern food—its foraged greens and odd, disreputable cuts of meat, its obscure fish and heirloom corn, rice, and other starches—had been largely passed over by producers. A ripe tomato could start a pagan religion, but who cared about a cowpea?

“You know how many strains of rice they tried to grow in this area?” Brock asked me, when we visited the farm northeast of Charleston where two-thirds of his produce is grown. “One hundred. One hundred different strains of rice. That’s crazy. So what happened? Why did that change? If they could pull it off in the nineteenth century, why can’t we do it today? Because we’re lazy, that’s why.” The farm is meant to remedy this, if only a little. It is overseen by an organic grower named Maria Baldwin, who has about twelve acres of rich, sandy soil in cultivation, a few miles from the sea. In one field, I saw rows of beets, borage, dog fennel, curly dock, wood sorrel, and muscadine grapes, among more than a dozen other herbs and vegetables. And that didn’t include the acre and a half that Brock has set aside for his experimental crops.

"We planted this whole area with benne last year and almost killed ourselves," Brock said. "There are pictures of me just standing in jungles of it." He reached down and plucked a small white blossom near the ground and held it up to me. It smelled sweet and faintly nutty—a lot better than the pork bone. Benne is the African form of sesame, brought over with slaves in the seventeenth-century. It was once a staple of the Charleston kitchen, its flour used to make delicate cookies and breads, and to thicken and flavor dishes like oyster stew. Yet the original strain, quite different from modern sesame, fell out of favor a century ago and is only now back in production. Brock tossed the blossom into the weeds. "It just pisses me off," he said. "I've dedicated my life to this craft and they can't give me the tools to do it right. Those crops just disappeared between 1930 and 1980—that fifty-year period when, I don't know . . . shit went south."

The nineteenth century was the great Age of Experiment in American agriculture. Three hundred years of immigration had brought over every conceivable crop—rice from China, quinoa from South America, groundnuts from Africa—and farmers found ways to grow them all. "We have this vision of antebellum agriculture as a kind of Never Never Land," David Shields, a professor of Southern letters at the University of South Carolina, who has become one of Brock's closest advisers, told me. "But it was actually a frenzy of research. They took the carrot culture of Flanders, the turnip culture of Germany, the beet culture of France, and tweaked them to create this extraordinary myriad of vegetables and grains." Before the first land-grant colleges were established, in the eighteenth-century, Shields said, every successful farmer had to be a breeder and agronomist, and many farmers published their work. "That was the literature that probably produced the most total words in the first half of the nineteenth century. It wasn't politics; it wasn't religion. It was agriculture."

Shields is a ruddy, square-built man of fifty-nine with thick, beetling brows. He can trace his Virginia ancestry back to the seventeenth century, yet he came late to Southern food. "My mother was a great

reader of *Gourmet*," he told me. "So I got the high end: beef Wellington, beef Stroganoff. She made a killer sweet-potato soufflé." It was only when he began to study old farming journals that he began to uncover an alternative history of American cuisine. It didn't grow out of the corseted cooking schools of Philadelphia and Boston. It didn't owe its panache to celebrity chefs like Charles Ranhofer, who popularized eggs Benedict and Baked Alaska at Delmonico's, in the eighteen-sixties and seventies. It began and ended with seeds. "For me, the people who are definitive in terms of taste in America are these guys who bred the vegetables," he said. "They could tell what was being bought and what wasn't. They were the ones tweaking these things, and it was their taste that was determinative."

The South made an ideal laboratory, with its rich earth and abundant sun. But its principal crops—cotton, tobacco, corn—were a tremendous drain on soil nutrients. By the eighteen-twenties, many farmers had exhausted their fields and had to turn to unusual plants and elaborate rotations to restore them. On the Sea Islands of South Carolina, some rice growers began to follow a seventeen-year sun cycle: they planted different crops every year, keying the sequence to their ideas about the earth's eccentric orbit and the changing lengths of the seasons. Theirs was "the most elegant farming system on the planet," Glenn Roberts, the owner of Anson Mills, in Columbia, South Carolina, and another of Brock's advisers, told me. They found that rice tastes best when planted after field peas, sweet potatoes after collard greens, and barley after butter beans. They found that kale absorbs the salt in coastal fields and that a rotation of cereals, legumes, and oil seeds builds up remarkable fertility and flavor. Roberts calls this the Holy Trinity of Southern agriculture.

Two centuries later, our food is bred largely for the convenience of producers: vegetables that ship well and tolerate cold storage, grains that resist insects and can be mechanically harvested, animals that fatten quickly on minimal feed. But, in the eighteen-hundreds, taste mattered most. A farmer might grow a leggy strain of corn, prone to blowing down in a storm, if its kernels made the heartiest grits. Or a finicky strain of

spelt with a flavor that lingered long on the tongue. To rank the relative deliciousness of crops, farmers studied “the delectation of beasts,” Shields said. They would feed a cow a mouthful of food and measure how much saliva it produced. The scale ran from juniper berries, at the bottom, to white May wheat, at the top, passing through Carolina Gold rice, with its velvety texture and hint of hazelnuts, and Sea Island white-flint corn—“the finest, as food for man, of all the known varieties,” according to the U.S. Census of 1880. Even sorghum, a grain now used mostly as fodder, became a delicacy in the nineteenth century. Its syrup had a bourbon softness more subtle than any molasses.

If the South was a laboratory, Charleston was its test kitchen. The city sat at a cultural and agricultural crossroads. It was home to Europeans, Africans, Native Americans, and Asians. It had ocean and farm, pasture and rice paddy, tropical fruit and temperate grain. A housewife wandering through its market stalls could find Italian olives, Seville oranges, Jamaican sugarcane, and Mexican chayote, all from local orchards and farms. Along the docks, she could choose from oysters, terrapins, sheepshead, and bastard snappers, among more than fifty kinds of fish. It was an American version of the scene near the end of Brillat-Savarin’s “The Physiology of Taste,” Shields said, where the Parisian gastronome sits sampling the world’s bounty from the comfort of his table. Except that Paris had to import its delicacies. In Charleston they grew all around you. “These were the real locavores,” Shields said. “This is where the food was generated. Rice grew better here than anywhere else in the Western Hemisphere. Benne grew better than in West Africa. So this is where the cuisine came together.”

And then it fell apart. The Carolina rice industry all but disappeared in the decades after the Civil War. Some farms were abandoned during the fighting and reclaimed by tidal marshes; others couldn’t survive without slave labor. The great truck farms that once encircled Charleston moved to California and New Jersey, the grain fields to the Midwest, and cotton claimed the rest. By the early nineteen-hundreds, benne had been rebred as an oil crop—the new seeds had a bitter taste and twenty per cent

more fat than those used for flour—and then abandoned altogether after David Wesson learned to turn cottonseed into cooking oil. And with those crops went much of what had been Southern cuisine.

“When we lose all these things, we lose their stories along with them,” Brock told me. “If the Sea Island red pea were to disappear, no one would be able to tell the story of how that lowly little cowpea landed in a bowl of Carolina Gold rice in the big house. That pea was what the slaves ate; it’s what the animals ate; it was a nitrogen fixer. It wasn’t this glamorous thing like Carolina Gold. But when they found their way into the same bowl, people realized that it’s a delicious dish. That is Hoppin’ John. When you put it together, you can taste the past. And we deserve to taste that again.”

Three years ago, when Brock’s maternal grandmother died, at the age of seventy-six, one of the first things he did was raid her basement. Audrey Morgan had spent her entire life in Wise County, Virginia, a solitary pocket of southern Appalachia. A small, seemingly frail woman, she was a tireless cook and gardener: her ten acres were really a small farm. She kept bees, butchered her own meat, and plowed the land with a pair of white-maned Haflinger horses. But to Brock what mattered most was her seed collection. Some of her varieties had been passed down in the family for longer than anyone could recall.

The collection is stored in the attic at McCrady’s now, stuffed in cardboard boxes and plastic bins, piled willy-nilly beneath the rafters in a kind of makeshift seed bank. “This part of the building used to be a brothel,” Brock told me one morning, as he rifled through the bins. “These were the sleeping quarters for the employees.” He was looking for things to plant at the farm that week, but it was hard to know where to start: none of these varieties were grown commercially anymore, and he could afford to plant only a few at a time. A bag of Dixie white butter peas sat next to a sack of Shantyboat butter beans. A box of Sea Island white-flint corn, hand-marked “Urgent” by Glenn Roberts, was hidden by a rack of African Guinea hams. Dozens of other varieties were tucked among

jugs of spices, canned goods, and high-tech appliances. "I can guarantee you this is the only place in America where you can stand and look at a pile of Tanzanian field peas and a centrifuge at the same time," Brock said.

He set aside a bag of Whippoorwill peas and another of Zipper cream peas—the ones speckled brown and black, the others bright pink, like magic seeds from "Jack and the Beanstalk." Then he reached into a bin and fished out a brown paper sack marked "Wise County greasy beans." He laughed. "Oh, man, these are so good!" he said. "They remind me of being a kid. This was always my chore. We would take these greasy beans when they were fresh, and take a string and needle and hang them above the wood-burning stove to dry. When you cooked them down and ate them, they'd take on this incredible umami flavor—this savory flavor like a pot roast. We called them leather britches. That was dinner a lot of times: corn bread and leather britches. I'd like to eat some now."

Brock grew up not far from his grandmother, on a steep-sided hill called Brock's Knob, surrounded by kin. His father and uncles were coal haulers—"Everybody had their hand in coal in some way or the other," he says—and he spent his afternoons hotdogging around abandoned strip mines on his bike. By the time he was eleven, in 1989, the family owned thirteen trucks and a logging business. Then his father died, of a heart attack, and within a year the business had folded. Brock's mother eventually found work managing a motel in Lewisburg, West Virginia, but in the interim the family spent two years living with her parents. "My dad had really spoiled me as a kid," Brock told me. "Then suddenly I was waking up and having to make my bed every morning, and my grandma was making sure it was perfect. It was almost military. And that's when I really started having hard-core chores. I didn't realize that I was getting these important life lessons. I just wanted to play Super Mario Brothers."

Brock's divided allegiance as a cook—his "internal struggle," as he puts it, between "purity and simplicity" and "cutting-edge, seriously interesting food"—can be traced back to those early days in his

grandma's kitchen. There was one grocery store in town and it was lousy, he says. The only good ingredients to be had were those which you grew or made yourself. He learned to bake corn pone and cat-head biscuits, to tend the garden and make pickles and preserves. He learned to put sorghum stalks through a horse-drawn press and boil down the syrup over an open fire. But it was cable television that made him a chef. When he wasn't doing chores, Brock was watching Julia Child, the Galloping Gourmet, and Justin Wilson ("That crazy Cajun dude. I could barely understand what he was saying"). At one point, he became obsessed with an infomercial about hand-hammered woks, so his grandmother bought him one. "It's not easy cooking in one of those things over an electric burner," he says. "They didn't put that in the infomercial. But I'd watch 'Yan Can Cook' and I was fascinated by how fast he could chop an onion. So I'd try to do that and throw that shit in the wok."

At sixteen, Brock got his first job in a kitchen, at a restaurant called Withers Hardware Company, in Abingdon, Virginia. It was a family place, with a huge menu and a hard-bitten but highly efficient crew. "Just watching all those guys cooking on the line with black bandannas on and Metallica blaring—watching them roll through a two-hundred- or three-hundred-cover service, chain-smoking Marlboro reds and talking about how much whiskey they drank the night before—I was sold," he says. Real chefs own their own knives, he'd heard on the Food Network, so he bought a set of stamped, serrated Henckels at J. C. Penney and brought them to work. "I made this killer case out of cardboard wrapped in electrical tape," he recalls. "These knives were so sharp that they'd cut right through and gash my fingers open. I had Band-Aids on every single one. So then I got really, really pumped up and specially ordered this Wüsthof nine-inch and had my name engraved on it. That's when I really started cutting myself."

Brock's stories from those years always seem to follow the same pattern. Whether he's making pizzas in Athens, Georgia, or running a four-star restaurant in Nashville, Tennessee, he starts each job seized by excitement and dread, barely disguising his incompetence. He's never

really at home in the white-jacketed world of chefs, never quite comfortable unless he's getting his ass kicked. Of the first time he was swamped by a dinner rush, he says, "I just fell in love with that stress and pressure, with that feeling of being in the weeds." Of his years at culinary school: "Every day they'd line you up like roll call in the Army. Some instructors would pull out a business card and rake it across your face to see if you'd shaved. I loved that. I needed it. I ate it up." Of his first interview for a sous-chef's position: "My hands were shaking so bad that I had to set my coffee cup back down. I still feel that fear every day."

McCrady's is designed to set the stakes as high as possible. The restaurant lies on a brick-and-cobblestone alley a short walk from the harbor, in the scrubbed and gilded jewel box that is historic Charleston. When George Washington and his staff supped there in 1791, they stabled their horses beneath the arched colonnade at street level and took their meal upstairs. (Legend has it that every time Washington drank a toast the city fired off a cannon outside, so that the citizenry could drink with him.) These days, the second floor is reserved for weddings and other functions, and the stable is the dining room, its arches converted into glass-coffered nooks.

Sitting by the fireplace one summer evening, I could easily imagine myself back a couple of centuries—an illusion that Charleston tries a little too hard to encourage. But Brock's food soon dispelled the thought. Most of the ingredients were locally grown: I'd watched a succession of scruffy purveyors stagger into the kitchen the day before, their faces flushed and their arms filled with bins of husk berries, stone crabs, melons as tiny as kumquats. Yet everything seemed exotic and new. The plates were fastidiously composed, like Surrealist landscapes by Tanguy: an orange sea of cantaloupe soup with reefs of sea-urchin roe; an emerald stream of juniper oil lined by mounds of barley malt and lamb's belly. Brock's dishes were meant to be wandered through, each taste a different flavor combination: elderberry preserves and licorice-root foam, sweetbreads and rhubarb juice. "We're trying to change the way people dine in Charleston," he said. "I want to get inspired, and I can't get inspired by

one big-ass piece of food. After bite four, I'm bored."

In 2001, when Brock was a sous-chef at the Jefferson Hotel in Richmond, Virginia, he came across an article in the magazine *Food Arts* about a dish called the Golden Egg. Invented by Ferran Adrià, the celebrated chef of elBulli, in Spain, it consisted of a quail-egg yolk, warm but not cooked, encased in a caramel shell and dusted with nutmeg, black pepper, sea salt, and powdered gold. It was like an edible fairy tale. "I had steam coming out of my ears," Brock told me. Over the next few years, he put himself through a kind of informal graduate school in food science. He tinkered with vapor ovens and sous-vide machines, conferred with industrial chemists, and amassed a small arsenal of enzymes, hydrocolloids, and other substances. By the time he became the head chef at McCrady's, in 2006, he was making dishes unlike anything ever seen in Charleston: Southern food as conceived by space aliens.

The restaurant had earned a reputation for excellent but not especially creative fare—"fancy meat and potatoes," as the *Charleston City Paper* put it. Then Brock came "blazing back into town with strange, foreign ideas." In one dish, he served salmon roe with beads of flash-frozen cucumber juice, like Dippin' Dots. In another, he roasted a pheasant with turnips, onions, and black truffles. To serve it, the waiter would place a bowl full of hay and liquid nitrogen next to the plate, then pour a thin stream of water into it. As the water hit the nitrogen, a cool fog billowed up from the bowl, enveloping the diner in the sweet scent of fall meadows where the pheasant had flown. "One guy got pissed off," Brock told me. "He was like, 'You're gonna serve me hay?' Well, I didn't tell you to eat it! I didn't think I'd have to tell a grown man not to eat hay."

Brock still takes unabashed delight in the gizmos and "miracle powders" in his kitchen. One wall at McCrady's bears a floor-to-ceiling rack about equally divided between traditional spices and substances like Ultratex, Methocel, sodium alginate, and Genugel CHP-2 kappa-carrageenan. But his science has grown more subtle over the years. He might add a touch of Versawhip 600K to a shiso foam, to give it body and loft, or glue six

lamb bellies together with brushstrokes of transglutaminase—an enzyme that forms bonds between proteins. But the interventions are mostly invisible. “If I take carrots at their peak and make a purée and don’t add the tiniest pinch of xanthan gum, it will weep—there will be a little halo of carrot juice,” he told me. “And I just can’t handle that. The carrot deserves better. It’s about using technology and science to make the food smarter and more consistent. It’s about being wise.”

One of the first dishes that Brock served me that night was a warm salad. It was spangled with petals, sprouts, and leaves of every color, like a meadow of wildflowers. “This contains your day,” he said. “It’s really still alive.” He and Glenn Roberts had taken me to the Sea Islands south of Charleston that morning, to go foraging with a botanist named Richard Porcher. A sprightly seventy-two-year-old with white hair and a soft Southern lilt, Porcher came from a twelfth-generation Carolina family and had been exploring the islands since he was a boy. “Sir, I am as local as they come,” he told me. “When I cross the Santee River, I am in foreign country.” Porcher arrived at my hotel carrying a hand-carved walking stick and wearing Wellington boots over khaki pants. He glanced down at my sandals and shorts and cocked an eyebrow. “I thought you was ready to do some bushwhackin,’ ” he said.

The Sea Islands are wilder now than they once were. By the end of the eighteenth century, the local cotton was the costliest in the world, with a long and exceptionally silky staple. (Queen Victoria is said to have used handkerchiefs made only of Sea Island cotton.) But the industry collapsed so completely by the nineteen-twenties, after the boll weevil struck, that even the seeds of its cotton were lost. Nowadays, the land is given over mostly to truck farms and brambly family estates, fiercely held against an advancing tide of condominiums and golf courses. Porcher would lead us over marshes and pastures, through forests scented with wild fennel and red bay laurel, across sunflower fields and abandoned plantations. But he made his first discovery less than half a mile from the hotel, along a run-down commercial strip in Wraggborough. “*Lepidium virginicum!*” he announced, like a king’s herald, when we joined him on

the sidewalk. He pointed to a scraggly little plant next to a street sign, then plucked a few leaves for us to chew. They tasted of lemon and hot spice. "Peppergrass," he said.

Southern food once owed much of its variety and agricultural vigor to wild plants. One of the most valuable slaves on many plantations was the huntsman, who would forage in the woods every morning and afternoon. "He'd bring back herbs and plants to grow in the kitchen garden," Roberts explained. "There was this constant interchange between feral and domesticated foods." Sea Island red peas, for instance, were first grown from domesticated seed brought over from Africa. Invariably, though, a few of the plants at the edges of the fields went feral, mutating into varieties better suited to the local soil and climate. When the huntsman brought these wild cowpeas back to the garden, they hybridized with the domesticated plants, creating still more varieties for the farmer to select. Little by little, the crop grew hardier, tastier, more prolific. "You hunt for genetics in the margins—those are the characteristics you want," Roberts said. "That's why cowpeas can outcompete kudzu."

Roberts, who is sixty-three, has deep-set blue eyes and a silver forelock that tumbles across his face in the heat of a conversation. A self-taught chef, historian, plant breeder, and businessman, he talks in dizzying, often exhilarating torrents, like a manic Ph.D. candidate at his oral exam. He and David Shields tend to play complementary roles in their culinary detective work: Shields is the researcher and Roberts the experimenter; Shields digs through archives and Roberts puts the findings to the test in the field. "Glenn may be the single most surprising individual that I've met in the past fifteen years," Shields told me. "You think you know stuff, and you do know stuff, but he's thinking from another point of view—he'll say what you think you know ain't necessarily so."

In 1997, Roberts was walking through a bootlegger's field near Dillon, South Carolina, when he came upon a patch of Carolina white gourdseed—an all but extinct variety of corn once famous for its floral aroma and

creamy texture. Although Roberts was born and reared in California, he had often heard about such lost delicacies from his mother, who grew up in South Carolina. Within a year, he had sold his restaurant-design business, rented a six-thousand-square-foot warehouse in Columbia, two hours northwest of Charleston, and bought three nineteenth-century stone mills. He began by planting thirty acres of the gourdseed, then he moved on to rare varieties of oats, wheat, rice, and cowpeas. He now counts Thomas Keller and other top chefs among his customers and contracts farmers in more than thirty states to grow his crops. "Eighty per cent of what I put in the ground is from Glenn," Brock told me. "He's the godfather of it all. He's the Obi-Wan Kenobi."

Roberts gets most of his seeds from a network of private collectors, agricultural research stations, and seed banks such as the International Rice Research Institute, in the Philippines. Like the antebellum farmers on the Sea Islands, he lets his plants mutate and hybridize naturally, then brings in feral plants from wherever he can find them—ditches, crop margins, empty lots. "The roadside is now the field site," he says. Conventional breeders know exactly what qualities they want in a plant before they get them, but growing "landrace" crops is all about serendipity and surprise. "We work in epiphanies," Roberts said. "If the taste isn't remarkable, you won't get anyone's attention. It has to be astoundingly good."

Brock's salad was Stage 1 of this process: a single day's foraging. The dish was partly a riff on culinary history—a takeoff on *gargouillou*, a salad of local greens made famous by Brock's favorite chef, Michel Bras, of the restaurant Laguiole, in France—and partly a statement of purpose and place. Porcher had found sea bean, sheep sorrel, wild mustard, and yucca flower on Johns Island; purslane, pine tips, lamb's-quarter, and Queen Anne's lace on Edisto. "He's like a bird dog," Brock said. "We can't get four blocks before he's shouting, 'Pull over! Pull over!' "

Near the end of the trip, on Edisto, we came upon the ruined arches of an old plantation house, surrounded by a green chain-link fence. "Is that

garlic?" Brock said, peering at some weedy-looking stalks inside. Within minutes, the fence had been hopped, the stalks uprooted and thrown into the back of Brock's S.U.V., along with twenty or thirty other plants. The garlic turned out to be a rare Southern variety with a single cloveless bulb, like an onion. Brock scattered shavings of it across the salad. "There is this three-minute period when a plant is just out of the ground when it's out of this world," he said. "I'm always chasing that. Because I've tasted it and I've seen the light."

Brock with one of his heritage breeds—the start of a grand culinary reclamation project. Photograph by Cesuralab

Photograph by Cesuralab

Brock's epiphany came in the winter of 2007, a little less than a year after he arrived at McCrady's. He was at a resort in the foothills of the Smoky Mountains called Blackberry Farm, he recalls, when he heard a talk by Glenn Roberts and John Coykendall, the resort's master gardener. Growing up in the nineteen-fifties, Coykendall loved to eat a variety of corn called Webb-Watson, which had a wonderfully earthy flavor. "It tastes like mountain water," Roberts said. In later years, the seed had all but disappeared as sweeter, more productive strains replaced it. But Roberts had recently discovered a patch in North Carolina, in yet another bootlegger's field, on the eastern slope of the Blue Ridge Mountains. The grits it produced were sensational.

"You know how you have these moments when something just hits you in the face?" Brock told me. "It blew me away that I'd never put much thought into all this, and here I was a Southerner who loved food." That night, he told Roberts that he'd like to start growing heirloom crops. "He kind of laughed and said, 'O.K.' Then the next day he found me and said, 'I've got some corn for you to grow called Jimmy red, and it's pretty rare. But first you've got to talk to the guy who has it. You've got to prove that you're worthy.' "

Seed saving is a kind of secret society. It deals in rare, long-dishonored commodities and runs directly counter to mainstream agriculture. (It's no

surprise that bootleggers often do it best.) Three years earlier, Roberts, David Shields, and a handful of others had founded the Carolina Gold Rice Foundation, to promote the study and production of heirloom grains. But most of their research was still done in the margins of their academic work. They circulated their findings samizdat fashion and passed around envelopes full of endangered seeds. Some varieties survived only on isolated family farms or in the hidden hollers that Roberts found in his wanderings. If they were allowed to cross-pollinate with other varieties, whole strains could be lost. (Roberts still cringes at the memory of a rare African squash that was planted next to a field of melons, turning out squash that tasted like cantaloupe.) “You can’t just say that you’re going to do this,” he told Brock. “Some of this stuff I’ve bled for.”

Brock eventually met with the owner of the Jimmy red corn—a farmer on James Island named Ted Chewning—and persuaded him to part with ten precious ears of it. When I asked Brock to describe it, he held out his left arm. “I’ve got it here,” he said, pointing to a crimson cob tattooed above the elbow. It was just one part of a polychrome vegetable garden that was twined around his entire arm, from the wrist to the shoulder. I could see wild ramps, garlic scapes, black radishes, fiddlehead ferns, and dozens of other plants tucked among the leaves and tendrils. The tattoo had taken twenty five-hour sessions to create, all in the past year, and it wasn’t done yet.

“It changed my life, growing my own food,” Brock said. “You start to see why farmers are so strange: they have a lot of time alone to ponder the questions of the universe. I had never experienced that as a chef. You don’t get silence. You don’t get fresh air. You don’t get that calmness.” As a manager, Brock had always been prone to fits of temper and imperious perfectionism. The first few times he took over a kitchen, much of the staff quit within weeks. And though he still brings an intensity to his work that seems to bend the atmosphere around him, it now serves an almost Buddhist simplicity of purpose. “When you see how impossibly difficult farming is—when you plant something and get excited about it and it doesn’t grow because you don’t know what you’re doing—it changes the

way you cook," he told me. "When you finally do get a crop, you're so excited you almost don't want to do anything to it."

In the winter of 2009, when one of the owners of McCrady's came by to tell Brock that he and his partners had bought a double-decker Victorian on Queen Street, Brock knew exactly what he wanted to do. The new restaurant would be as homegrown as he could possibly make it. Not just the grains and the vegetables but the pickles, the vinegars, the chili sauce, and the spices would be locally produced. "See those?" he asked me one day, pointing to some plastic jugs lined up in a pantry. "That's seawater from the Charleston Shelf, thirty miles offshore. Incredibly pure." Southern salt is tough to find, he explained. At first, he had to have it shipped in from a mine underneath Avery Island, Louisiana, where Tabasco is produced. Then he hired a woman in the Florida Keys to make fleur de sel for him. Now he was making his own.

Like many a recent convert, Brock had grown increasingly exacting in his zeal. He'd become an authenticator of corn, a compiler of pickle recipes. For the past few months, he'd been scouting for land on the Sea Islands where he could raise his own pigs. He planned to start with heritage breeds like Tamworth and Berkshire, then cross them with Ossabaws. As tasty as they are, he said, Ossabaws are half the size of other breeds and grow half as fast. If he could put their fat in a larger animal, then let them roam the forests eating acorns for two years (commercial hogs are usually slaughtered at ten months), he could create the perfect pig. He had tried this once before, on a small scale, and ended up with a hog that weighed eight hundred and fifty pounds. "The people at the slaughterhouse were terrified," he told me. "But it was the most beautiful pork I'd ever seen. When you cracked open those hams, you could still smell the acorns." A native pig, raised on native nuts, cured with local sea salt: "To me, that's really cooking," he said.

The new restaurant opened last November, after a two-million-dollar renovation. From the outside, the house looked much as it did in 1893, when it was built: white-columned porches out front, wide enough for

rocking chairs, and double-hung windows all around. But the inside had been gutted and rebuilt, the wide-plank floors refinished. The kitchen had been opened to the dining room and equipped with a wood-burning stove; the tables were made from the salvaged floorboards of an old gymnasium. "It would have been a lot easier to do a steakhouse," one of the owners told the *Charleston Post & Courier*.

The hardest part, as it turned out, was finding a name. After a few false starts, Brock and the investors finally called a meeting and invited their spouses along. (Brock is married to his high-school sweetheart, Tonya Combs-Brock, who works as the office manager at McCrady's.) Then they passed around a hat for suggestions. "There were some really bad ones," Brock said. "I wanted to call it Heritage, but no one seemed to like that. But when I saw Husk I knew that was it right away. Everyone wanted to look up the exact definition in the dictionary. I was like, 'I can tell you what it's gonna say: it's a protective outer layer for a seed. And that's exactly what we are.' "

When I met David Shields at Husk for dinner one night, the tables were set with flasks of sprouting sweet potatoes. Split logs of hickory and oak were stacked in the hall, next to the stove, and a blackboard hung in the entryway. There were no daily specials on it, just a list of ingredients: "Butter: Happy Cow Creamery, Pelzer, South Carolina"; "Smoky Bacon: Allan Benton, Madisonville, Tennessee." When Brock came out in his apron to greet us, he was holding a bulb of the same strange garlic that we'd found on Edisto. Shields put on a pair of rimless reading glasses and peered at it. "I think it's an old variety that used to be grown on the Georgia-Alabama border," he said. "Physicians probably used it for medicinal purposes—as a kind of digestive pill."

Brock nodded. "It's super strong," he said. "But if you cook it and sauté it, it has a texture like scalloped potatoes." Then he ducked back into the kitchen for the dinner rush. "These guys are about to get their butts kicked," he said.

While McCrady's tends to draw Charleston's country-club set, Husk pulls

in a more homespun crowd—red-faced farmers and retired schoolteachers, double-wide tradesmen and grandparents out for dinner with their grandchildren. Brock worried, at first, that they'd need time to adjust to the restaurant's stripped-down style. "We opened in the winter, like a bunch of idiots," he told me. "Hey! Let's build a restaurant based on things growing in the South and serve only collard greens, cabbage, and turnips!" Less than two months later, *Southern Living* named Husk one of the best new restaurants in the South. In September, *Bon Appétit* called it the best new restaurant in the country.

Brock and his chef de cuisine, Travis Grimes, rewrite the menu at Husk every day, based on whatever arrives in the kitchen that morning. The food comes to the table in cast-iron pans and on carved wooden platters, the savory dishes paired with acidic sides: raw oysters and pickled ramps, rattlesnake beans with buttermilk sauce, sorghum-fried green tomatoes with goat cheese and wild peaches. "It's just a sea of plates all the time," Brock said. This is how Sunday dinner was eaten at his grandmother's house. You took a bite of biscuit, a bite of banana pepper, a bite of creamed corn, each taste enhancing the next, each ingredient given its proper attention.

Halfway through dinner, Brock set a small glazed iron pot on the table. Inside, a mound of creamy white rice was topped by a thick sauce of reddish-brown peas. This was Hoppin' John as it was meant to taste, he said. Instead of black-eyed peas, he had used Tanzanian field peas—a rich, meaty variety grown on his farm. Instead of Uncle Ben's rice, he'd used Charleston Gold, an aromatic new strain crossed from older varieties by the Carolina Gold Rice Foundation. A spray of herbs and onion flowers garnished the dish, and the three elements together had a kind of cosmic simplicity: earthy peas, floral rice, living greens.

And yet, if I hadn't known the story behind it, I'm not sure the dish would have grabbed my attention. The menu at Husk is like a farmhouse table stripped of a century's worth of sloppy paint, revealing the lovely quartersawn oak underneath. It's comfort food of the highest calibre, but

I sometimes missed the mad inventions at McCrady's, the seductive strangeness of its flavors. "It's awesome to celebrate the old recipes," Matt Lee, a Charleston native who has co-authored two Southern cookbooks with his brother, Ted, told me. "But what happens if you make that antebellum rice cracker and it doesn't really blow your mind? What happens if you go back and say, 'That's sort of bland'?"

The Lee brothers are great fans of Brock's cooking, but they've taken the opposite approach to their heritage. Their books offer a cheeky, modern version of the Charleston kitchen, spiked with recipes like Rice Pudding Pops and Green Goddess Potato Salad. If the decline of Southern food seems indisputable to Brock—"I believe that the Rice Era, from 1680 to 1930, was when food was most delicious," he told me, as if reciting a catechism—the Lees still have a soft spot for the MoonPies and Sun Drop sodas of their youth. "There is no way to re-create 1790," Matt Lee told me. "The people have changed; the vocabulary has changed; the heating techniques have changed. Everything has changed." If the Golden Age of Southern food has come and gone—and he's not convinced it ever went away—no amount of heirloom cabbage will bring it back. "You might as well blow your own light bulbs."

A few days after I came home to Brooklyn, I ordered a box of flours and grains from Anson Mills and began to cook. Mine was in no way a controlled experiment. Even with Roberts's careful recipes as guides—his wife and collaborator, Kay Rentschler, is a former food writer for the *Times*—I couldn't do justice to the ingredients, not to mention their price. But if crops like Jimmy red corn are going to make a comeback they'll have to prove themselves with ordinary cooks. "It's supply and demand, simple as that," Brock said. "If people see them and taste them, they'll want them." Over the next two months, my daughter Ruby and I made benne cookies, Chicken Bog, and five kinds of grits. We made cream biscuits, rice waffles, antebellum oatmeal, and coconut layer cake. We tried to have what the Lee brothers call "a happy field-pea experience."

It was a weirdly successful run. Aside from a loaf of whole-wheat bread

better suited for ship's ballast, every dish tasted good. Or, rather, it tasted exactly as it should, like some primal, all-cap version of itself: *CORN, RICE, WHEAT, OATS*. At Husk, the best dishes had been fine enough to make me rethink my prejudices: grits as silky as any risotto; Ossabaw pork fat so smoky and sweet I preferred it to the meat. But I wondered if a regular kitchen wasn't the best place for this food after all. It reminded me of something Shields had said: "A lot of people come to Husk and taste the corn bread, skillet-cooked in bacon fat, and a little light bulb goes off: 'This is the corn bread of home, only better. And now I understand why I liked that thing to begin with.' "

Southern food is more than a collection of recipes and seeds. It's a distillate of memory and hard-won experience, of ocean crossings and forest clearings, turnip winters and radish springs. "I have no interest in sitting at a hearth and making sure my heritage apples are sputtering properly by the fire," Shields said. "I see no need to sort of Williamsburg ourselves back. But the communal response to Husk has been extraordinary. There is just a presence of place here." Over the next few years, more and more heirloom crops will come back into production: American chestnuts and Ethiopian blue malting barley, China black rice and Sea Island cream peas. And with those crops and the careful tending they require, a little of the nineteenth-century landscape will return as well. "First the earthworms come back, then the bees, then the wild animals," Shields said. "On some of these Carolina Gold rice fields, even the bobolinks are returning—and they were considered one of the two tastiest birds in the nineteenth century." He laughed. "It's great when your ethics and your hedonism converge."

When I asked Shields which nineteenth-century crop he'd most love to taste, he rattled off a long list. For every plant that has been brought back, he said, hundreds are still lost to history: musk melons and tomato figs, persimmons and amber sorghums, sugarcanes and West Indian citrus. In some cases—like the tart, potently flavored Neunan's Prolific strawberry—the seeds have yet to be rediscovered. In others, the crops are just damn hard to grow. The most elegant of all Hoppin' Johns was

made with Sea Island white rice peas, but when Brock tried planting them last year they withered on the vine. "All it took was one morning of not going to the garden," he said, "and they were gone."

He'll get them one of these days, he said. When it comes to food, the past is never really beyond reach. The autumn after his grandmother died, Brock took his mother to Blackberry Farm, the resort in the Smoky Mountains where he'd had his epiphany two years earlier. One day, he was giving a talk on heirloom beans in the garden shed, when an odd thing happened. Forty or fifty people had gathered to hear him, around a table covered with jars and bags of seed, when Brock glanced over at his mother and realized that she was crying. On the table in front of her was a bag of gray-and-black speckled seeds. "It just said 'Audrey Morgan: Wild Goose beans,' " Brock recalls. "I guess I'd left them there on my last visit. They were my grandma's prized beans."

This summer, he took a handful and planted them on his farm. When I asked him how he would prepare the beans at Husk, he didn't bother coming up with a fancy recipe. He would just preserve them in jars the way his grandmother did, he said, and serve them as they were—seasoned with a little salt from the Charleston Shelf. ♦

Burkhard Bilger published his first piece in The New Yorker in 2000 and became a staff writer the following year.