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APR/MAY 2012

Dixie Chic

The story of the dapper chef who popularized southern cooking—and other enticing cuisines.

MELANIE REHAK



Southern cooking guru Craig Claiborne.

Memo to the Powers That Be:

When I die, I would like to be transported immediately, and in perpetuity, to the picnic that Craig Claiborne held on Gardiners Island, just off East Hampton, Long Island, on August 1, 1965. I will live there in a state of perfect bliss, feasting on the following Francophilic offerings:

1. *Squab split and grilled with mustard and bread crumbs by Jean Vergnes (late of the ultrachic Colony in Manhattan).*
2. *Pierre Franey's ceviche, served in a giant clamshell, and poached striped bass caught from the bay just moments before cooking.*
3. *Jacques Pépin's delectable fruit salad in Kirschwasser from the chef's signature carved watermelons (I can't help but wonder if he ever made this for Charles de Gaulle when he was the General's personal chef).*
4. *René Verdon's pâté de campagne (good thing he was on vacation from his job as White House chef—perhaps the Kennedys were in Hyannis Port?).*
5. *Lobster boiled and stuffed with a mixture of hard-cooked eggs, parsley, and its own entrails made by Roger Fessaguet of La Caravelle (once one of New York's choicest dining rooms).*
6. *Tiny, crunchy whitebait skimmed from the surf with a net by various child guests, dipped in batter, and fried instantly (because who can possibly resist a food that combines salt, fat, and pure happiness).*

With these items, all consumed from a table assembled from driftwood, I will be delighted to partake of the Dom Pérignon provided by the island's owner, Robert David Lion Gardiner, Sixteenth Lord of the Manor, served in Baccarat crystal borrowed for the occasion. Since this is my final request to You, I humbly ask to be allowed to skip the Almaden Mountain White Chablis brought by the host. (Craig, what were you thinking?)

Yours very truly,

M. R.

By the time of this momentous afternoon in Gardiners Bay, Craig Claiborne was the most powerful food critic in the United States—as Thomas McNamee frequently reminds us in *The Man Who Changed the Way We Eat: Craia Claiborne and the American Food Renaissance*

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then time changed the way the East City looked, and the time that food restaurants (Free Press, \$27). Not only that, Claiborne had virtually created the kingdom over which he ruled with scrupulously high standards and the firm conviction that everyone else should be eating exactly what he ate. As Nora Ephron put it in her biting, hilarious 1968 essay "The Food Establishment": "He has been able to bring down at least one restaurant [Claude Philippe's Pavillon], crowd customers into others, and play a critical part in developing new food tastes. He has singlehandedly revived sorrel and cilantro, and, if he could have his way, he would singlehandedly stamp out iceberg lettuce and garlic powder. To his dismay, he played a large part in bringing about the year of beef Wellington."

The fabled picnic took place in the long sweet stretch between Claiborne's installation as the first male food editor of the *New York Times*, the job of his dreams, which he finally won in 1957, and his eventual decline in the late 1970s and '80s. His later years were marked by erratic behavior, probably brought on by too much alcohol, poor health, and, one can only assume, the strain of a lifetime spent sublimating both his less-than-refined past and the fact that he was a gay man living in a straight man's world. It was certainly the combination of all three that created the predictable chain of events at his famous Hamptons dinner soirees, which McNamee describes with an eye for debauchery: "the third, fourth, fifth, who knows which round of stingers; the late, loud, blotto voices lifted in song; Craig grabbing the genitals of flabbergasted male first-time guests just to see what would happen." On especially raucous nights, the festivities also included Claiborne's rendition of "Jet Song" from *West Side Story*.

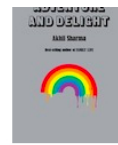
This behavior was not, needless to say, what most people expected of the publicly genial, proper Claiborne, who was "almost never photographed without a beatific smile" and who, even in the '70s, when he was plunging into nouvelle cuisine and making a trip to Vietnam during the war to taste and report on the food, was still more than happy to write pieces in the *Times* like "The Great Indian Pudding Controversy Continues." True, he was capable of slinging arrows within the tiny, insular food world, but that arena was miles away from his readers' kitchens and dining rooms; to them, he was a kind of patron saint of food knowledge (a 2006 *New Yorker* article referred to his 1961 *New York Times Cookbook* as part of a "holy trinity" of the 1960s, along with Julia Child's *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* and Michael Field's *Cooking School*), the paragon of refinement and taste, someone born to the world he now inhabited.

No doubt many of his acolytes would have been surprised to learn he'd grown up poor in a Mississippi boardinghouse with a domineering, socially ambitious mother who embarrassed him so much he finally cut her off—even skipping her funeral in 1966—and a bankrupt father with whom he possibly had furtive nocturnal sexual encounters as a child. (Claiborne himself put forth this information in his 1982 memoir, *A Feast Made for Laughter*, but McNamee calls it into question on the basis of Claiborne's love of shocking people, the vague way he describes the interludes, and the fact that he had never once mentioned the abuse to anyone before the book's publication. All of this, McNamee writes, "may suggest that this memory was more nightmare than fact.") Or to learn that he had been in the navy during World War II and the Korean War and risen to the rank of executive officer. Or that he had a long-term relationship with a married man to whom he would eventually leave a large part of his estate, and who, for his part, left absolutely no record of their relationship at all.

Readers knew him, rather, as a graduate of the famous *École Professionnelle de la Société Suisse des Hôteliers* on the shores of Switzerland's Lake Geneva, and as a champion of what were then new and exciting cuisines and the people who he thought could best bring them to the American palate. His support of Julia Child came at just the right moment, though she would no doubt have succeeded without him—McNamee is right when he notes that "Child was beloved, but Craig Claiborne was the authority." He introduced his loyal fans to Marcella Hazan, at the time a housewife who spoke so little English she accidentally invited Claiborne to lunch when he called to ask about doing a piece on one of her in-home cooking classes. (When Hazan told her husband someone from the *Times* was coming to lunch, and he asked who it was, she replied: "I don't know, something like Crack-Crack.") Add to the list Virginia Lee and Grace Zia Chu, who made Chinese cooking comprehensible to Claiborne for the first time, an understanding he passed on to his readers with delight; and Diana Kennedy, whom he encouraged to open a cooking school in New York. By writing about it for the paper, he both ensured the school's success and introduced Mexican food to a country that knew nothing beyond "tamales and gloppy enchiladas."

In the end, though, no amount of globe-trotting or French wine could separate Claiborne entirely from his origins. He embraced them at last with the publication of *Craig Claiborne's Southern Cooking* in 1987, when he was sixty-seven years old. In the introduction, after reminiscing at length about his childhood among the fried chicken, catfish, and chitlins of his native region and his mother's "fantastic palate," he admits that "perhaps the most prized possession in my reference library (it contains numerous first editions of French classics such as the Alexandre Dumas *Grand Dictionnaire de Cuisine*, 1873) is the manuscript notebook compiled for me by my mother when I returned from the Navy in 1946 and rented an apartment in Chicago. It is filled with her favorite recipes, including her 'famous' creation, chicken spaghetti, with its mushrooms and cubed chicken in a garlic-tinged tomato-and-meat sauce; 'heirloom' recipes for a family Wedding Punch, which she notes is two hundred years old; [and] many Cajun and Creole recipes."

Southern Cooking is dedicated to his sister Augusta and packed with recipes ranging from Catfish Baked with Cheese to his mother's Beaten Biscuits. ("I also offer a modernized version made in a food processor," he writes in a note here. "The results are fair but cannot compare with those beaten with anguish"—a comment that says as much about his



temperament as anything else you might read.) The book is enormously personal, buoyed by the same sense of excitement about a specific set of flavors and ingredients that fueled Claiborne's passions for food made much farther afield. "Food offered Claiborne a way home," John T. Edge and Georgeanna Milam write in their foreword to a new reissue of *Southern Cooking*. "Recognized as the nation's foremost cookery arbiter, he was free, at last, to embrace his roots. In the writing . . . Claiborne gained passage back to his mother's table. Meanwhile, the South gained an advocate."

And what an advocate he was. There he is on the cover of the new edition of *Southern Cooking*, that beatific smile stretched wide, a classic striped chef's apron tied snugly over his ever-crisp shirt and tie, standing at the counter in what looks to be his East Hampton kitchen. He looks ready to ask you in for a conversation, maybe to share some of the local seafood or take a turn with the whisk. It's an invitation no one could refuse, Almaden Chablis notwithstanding.

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