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ARTS & LETTERS

North Carolina
Memories
& Cooking

By GARY SHAPIRO

Southern culinary history is loaded with dishes like blueberry duff, crack pudding, and Yalla gal, not to mention fish roe with grits and collards with drop dumplings. And though you might have to travel south of the Mason-Dixon Line to taste them, you can read about them in "Classic Southport Cooking: Recipes and Reminiscences" by Lewis Hardee Jr., former chairman of the musical theater department at Wagner College.



Mr. Hardee delivered a talk at the National Arts Club on the subject of his research, which he comes by honestly. When people ask him where he's from, he replies: "Southport, North Carolina, a little north of the South Carolina line."

His book offers recollections of growing up during the mid-century in Southport, a coastal town south of Wilmington. Its current population is about 2,500. Just how small is that? Someone once dialed a wrong phone number looking for him, and the person on the other end replied, "He's not here, but I can tell you he's gone to New York."

The daily rhythms of Mr. Hardee's hometown emerge in this tapestry of photos, reminiscences, and 700 recipes. In the introduction, he writes about enjoying great cuisine in New York, such as broiled lamb chops at Jimmy Neary's Irish restaurant on the East Side and rum-drenched babas at Ferrara's Bakery in Little Italy. Still, he craves the food of the South: "At the end of the day, I want my down-home Southport cooking."

That includes seafood from creeks, crops grown in backyards, slow ovens baking bread, and "pork barbecue roasted all night over a smoking pit by church volunteers." At the lecture, he spoke about the waterfront where his father owned a shrimp-packing house and where youngsters from town gathered to watch boats being launched. Returning late in the afternoon, menhaden boats would blow a foghorn, letting the townsfolk know how large the catch was that day. Each blast signaled 100,000 fish caught.

The book relates anecdotes about the local theater, the Amuzu. A co-proprietor, Lillie Furpless, would keep townsfolk waiting outside the theater when her dinner ran late. Rowdy young viewers inside the theater faced one Ms. Mary Johnson, who would walk down the aisle, shine a flashlight in their faces, and snap her fingers. "If all else failed," Mr. Hardee writes, "they'd send in the Big Gun, old Mr. Price," who could silence the theater with one look.

At the National Arts Club, Mr. Hardee recalled making use of his grandmother's old 1930s popcorn machine at home and selling popcorn in front of the Amuzu theater — until the owners got wise enough to install their own machine.

The book is so filled with recipes and stories of Mr. Hardee's relatives that it feels like a family reunion. There's grandmother Alta Wescott Doshier, who, when she had trouble sleeping, would count widows in town. His cousin Carl Knox would walk in the woods looking for berries and fruits while carrying a 30-inch stick with forks at the end called "fingers" to poke into briars. His wild plum reserves recipe is in the book.

Mr. Hardee recalled episodes from his own childhood, including the perils of buying shaved ice and transporting it by bicycle at night during a thunderstorm. The author's storytelling conveys a small-town world like Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha or Mayberry, N.C., in "The Andy Griffith Show." There are characters such as Willie McKenzie, who owned the ice cream parlor, as well as a dance hall next door that he closed permanently after a shooting took place there. Then there was tall, mustachioed Harry Sell, whom some in town were suspicious of because he didn't attend church. Mr. Hardee said Sell was a tinkerer who used part of a Ford truck to devise a harvester for scuppernon grapes, which do not

grow in clusters. The contraption would straddle the vines and slap them free with brushstrokes.

To create the book, Mr. Hardee scoured local cookbooks and interviewed town relatives and friends to collect various recipes. Photographs are interspersed. The author lamented having gone through eight rolls of film trying to get decent photographs of pie.

The cover of the book is a watercolor of Southport by artist Arthur Newton, who studied in New York but returned to Southport to live and work. Guests at the lecture devoured Mary Temple's Chocolate Dice — also known as fudge. Also on offer was Ann Warren's chocolate pie and nonalcoholic "Methodist Champagne." Those who want a second helping of Mr. Hardee's writing can read his forthcoming history of the Lambs Theatre Club (McFarland), whose members included John Barrymore, Irving Berlin, and Will Rogers.

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