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Southern Provisions: The Creation and Revival of a Cuisine

David S. Shields

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Southern food is America's quintessential cuisine. From creamy grits to simmering pots of beans and greens, we think we know how these classic foods should taste. Yet the southern food we eat today tastes almost nothing like the dishes our ancestors enjoyed because the varied crops and livestock that originally defined this cuisine have largely disappeared. Now, a growing movement of chefs and farmers is seeking to change that by recovering the rich flavor and diversity of southern food. At the center of that movement is historian David Shields, who has spent over a decade researching early American agricultural and cooking practices. In *Southern Provisions*, he reveals how the true ingredients of southern cooking have been all but forgotten and how the lessons of its current restoration and recultivation can be applied to other regional foodways.

Shields's turf is the southern Lowcountry, from the peanut patches of Wilmington, North Carolina to the sugar cane fields of the Georgia Sea Islands and the citrus groves of Amelia Island, Florida, and he takes us on an excursion to this region in order to offer a vivid history of southern foodways, drawing connections among plants, farms, growers, seed brokers, vendors, cooks, and consumers. Shields begins by looking at how professional chefs during the nineteenth century set standards of taste that elevated southern cooking to the level of cuisine. He then turns to the role of food markets in creating demand for ingredients and enabling conversation between producers and preparers. Next, his focus shifts to the field, showing how the key ingredients—rice, sugarcane, sorghum, benne, cottonseed, peanuts, and citrus—emerged and went on to play a significant role in commerce and consumption. Shields concludes with a look at the challenges of reclaiming both farming and cooking traditions.

From Carolina gold rice to white flint corn, the ingredients of authentic southern cooking are returning to fields and dinner plates, and with Shields as our guide, we can satisfy our hunger both for the most flavorful regional dishes and their history.

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