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Chillie bears promoted to “palate cleanser”

The frozen treat known locally as [chillie bears](#) recently made its upscale dining debut at [The Grey](#), the new Savannah restaurant from chef Mashama Bailey.

Frozen Kool-Aid is sold out of older African-American women’s homes across the South, but the phenomenon is largely invisible beyond the boundaries of traditionally black neighborhoods. Bailey, who last cooked at Prune in New York City, says many white patrons are baffled by the one-ounce serving she presents as a “palate cleanser.”

Black customers, though, instantly recognize the homage to the Dixie cups of Bailey’s childhood.

“They know,” she says.

Almost nothing has been written about chillie bears, which have been a fixture of Lowcountry summers nearly as long as Kool-Aid has been on the market.

While the treats are usually the centerpiece of informal neighborhood economies, the Coastal Ice Cream Parlor at 220 Rutledge Ave. sold them as early as the 1940s, two decades after Edwin Perkins invented the beverage powder.

“They were five cents, in a paper 3-ounce cup, and flavors of all kinds,” [native Charlestonian Miriam DeAntonio](#) recalls. “We went any time we could scare up a nickel.”

The standard chillie bear recipe calls for nothing but Kool-Aid in a cup, although the concentrated drink mix is sometimes augmented with fruit juice or pieces of fresh fruit. At The Grey, Bailey initially made her chillie bears from tea and organic cane sugar; her current formula is closer to lemonade. The chillie bear is served in a disposable soufflé cup with a small wooden paddle for spooning.

But Bailey doesn’t use the term “chillie bear,” which is peculiar to Charleston. Chillie bears are called “huckabucks” in New Orleans; “freeze cups” around Norfolk, Va.; “hard cups” in Kinston, N.C. and “ice balls” in Cincinnati. In Savannah, Bailey is giving diners a “thrill.”

The Grey is located in Savannah’s retired Greyhound bus terminal at 109 Martin Luther King Blvd. The restaurant’s Southern-inflected menu includes seafood boudin, made with Carolina gold rice, and red rice cakes. Dinner is served every night but Sunday.

For more information, visit [thegreyrestaurant.com](#), or call (912)662-5999.

