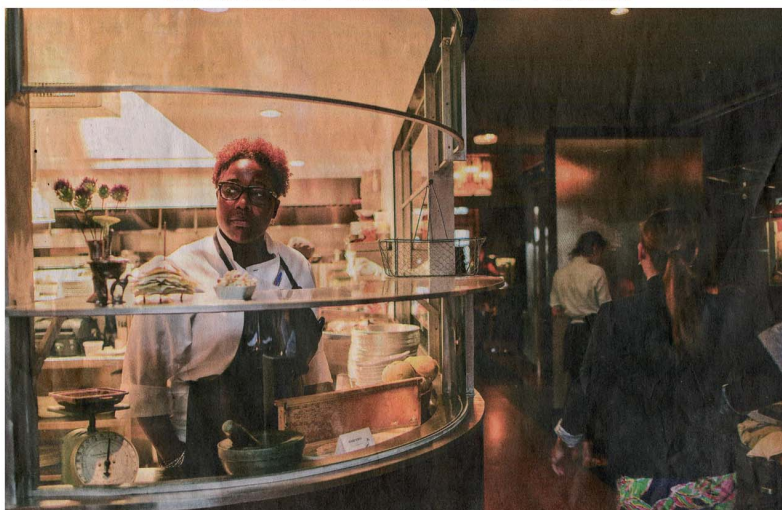


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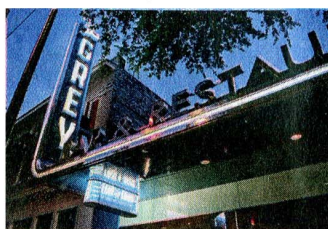
Food

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Not Soul Food, but Soulful

A Bronx-born chef is interpreting Southern cuisine through the filter of her own experience.



Mashama Bailey, the chef at the Grey in Savannah, Ga., looks out at the dining room from the kitchen. The restaurant, left, was once a segregated bus station.

By JEFF GORDINIER

SAVANNAH, GA. — A few days before she drove into town to run the kitchen at the Grey, one of the most talked-about new restaurants in the country, Mashama Bailey treated herself to an eating tour of the South.

She had spent a chunk of her childhood in Savannah, between the ages of 5 and 11, but she remembered those years only in flashes. Her formative years had really been in New York City, and she thought a fast immersion in Southern cuisine would be inspiring, instructive and delicious.

So curving south from North Carolina to New Orleans, she tasted buttermilk and sorghum and Benton's bacon, Nashville hot chicken and Cajun boudin, oyster po' boys and red beans and rice. Then in Mississippi, at a Jackson landmark called the Mayflower Cafe, it all clicked: She ordered deviled crabs, whose accompanying sauce she recognized from childhood.

"I called my mom," she said. "I was like, 'Mom, this place has the dressing that you used to make for us when we were little!'"

The tangy-creamy memory source was Comeback Sauce, the Delta version of rémoulade. That sauce, and Ms. Bailey's spin on deviled crabs, appeared as a special this month at the Grey, a restaurant with a symbolic power that is hard to ignore.

Here you find an African-American female chef working side-by-side with her white male business partner in a much heralded restaurant in a former bus station that once had separate waiting areas and restrooms for black and white travelers.

"People walk in and they say, 'I remember when this was segregated,'" Ms. Bailey said.

John O. Morisano, who goes by John, was raised on Staten Island and runs what he describes as an early stage investment firm. He moved to Savannah, patiently negotiated the purchase of an abandoned Greyhound bus station, spent a few million to bring back its powder-blue and stainless-steel gleam and recruited Ms. Bailey to be his business partner and executive chef. The history of the place is not lost on him. But he stressed that more elemental concerns are the first priority.

"It really comes back to food and wine, a place where people gather and come together over that," he said. "The whole thing is about what Mashama's cooking and her point of view on food. The comment I hear more than any? 'I was born and raised in the South, and those are the best collard greens I've ever had.'"

Ms. Bailey, 41, was born in the Bronx and raised largely in Queens. For almost four

years she was known as a calm and constant presence in the kitchen at Prune, Gabrielle Hamilton's restaurant in the East Village. Ms. Hamilton's cooking there is like a succulent collision of tradition and autobiography: Prune reflects her own very personal viewpoint on French country fare. It helps to look at Ms. Bailey's culinary approach at the Grey in a similar way. She is tapping into the traditions and ingredients of the South, yes, but she's interpreting the concept of Southern cuisine through the filter of her own experience and training. She's making what she likes to eat.

Her roast chicken arrives on sourdough toast that's soaked with pan juices. The bird is crowned with a ladle of a sauce that echoes Country Captain, a Lowcountry-meets-the-subcontinent staple that has a touch of curry and stewed currants.

Ms. Bailey also serves a "country pasta," which is like a Dixiefied carbonara with pork belly instead of pancetta, and a seafood boudin stuffed with crayfish, wild shrimp and Carolina Gold rice. There is also a spicy roasted eggplant based on a West African peanut stew. She smokes her collard greens with the wood from pecan trees, then cooks them soft with leeks, onions and shallots — and not a smidgen of pork. ("It's, like, vegan!" she said with a laugh.)

With a chef-driven internationally inflected menu like that, Ms. Bailey and Mr. Morisano know that they are bucking up against gastronomic preconceptions about the South, and about African-American cooking in particular.

"I think there are certain expectations," Ms. Bailey said. "When black people come here, they expect a certain thing: They expect it to be soul food. And I don't cook soul food. I cook food that's soulful and that comes from me."

Much of Savannah's economy hinges on tourism, and it's no secret that visitors mad for "Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil" make a beeline for Mrs. Wilkes Dining Room for fried chicken, candied yams and macaroni and cheese. (Ms. Bailey is no exception. "Let me tell you," she said. "Mrs. Wilkes is pretty good.") But Mr. Morisano, who has been studying the hospitality principles of Danny Meyer, is making a play for a different crowd: locals.

The challenge: Will locals respond?

"I told Mashama, 'You're an artist who happens to work in my favorite medium,'" said Philip Solomons, whose family has been prominent in Savannah society for five generations. "The question was, has Savannah become sophisticated enough to get what John and Mashama are doing?"

To answer that, Mr. Solomons glanced around the lively dining room and made note of how many of his friends had dropped by his table to say hello.

"Half the fun of eating here is the number of times you get interrupted," he said.

Ms. Bailey and Mr. Morisano, 48, were brought together by Ms. Hamilton. While dreaming up the Grey and driving back and forth between New York and Savannah, Mr. Morisano found himself in the car listening to Ms. Hamilton's audiotaped version of her memoir, "Blood, Bones and Butter." He began sending Ms. Hamilton letters and emails ("I don't think I've ever stalked anybody the way I stalked Gabrielle," he joked) until she agreed to sit down and talk with him about the crazy art of restaurateuring.

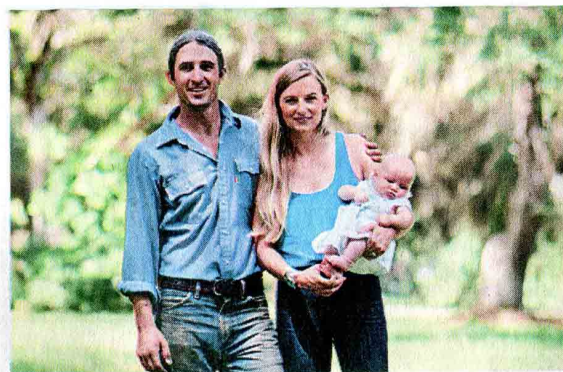
Ms. Hamilton let him know about Ms. Bailey. She remembered it as: "Well, duh. You should talk to Mashama." And she believed that Ms. Bailey deserved her own stage. "You could tell it was time," Ms. Hamilton said. For Mr. Morisano, "the fact that Gabrielle told me she could cook was good enough for me," he said. "Gabrielle told me she was the best fish cook she'd ever met."

Cautious by nature, Ms. Bailey was wary about leaving New York and heading south.

"Me being me, my immediate reaction was, 'No, I'm not going to go back there,'" she said. But Ms. Hamilton encouraged her, having pointed out, along the way, that there was a need for more African-American chefs to grab the national spotlight. So Ms. Bailey met Mr. Morisano ("this tall, kind of nerdy white guy," she said) at the National Arts Club on Gramercy Park.

"He was like, 'What do you think about food?'" Ms. Bailey said. "I said, 'I love it. What do you think about food?' We kind of built from there."

The Grey opened in December; Food & Wine magazine has called it one of the best new restaurants in the country. But for her part, Ms. Bailey admits she's still adjusting



Clockwise from top: Mashama Bailey, the chef of the Grey in Savannah, Ga., greets customers; the exterior of the restaurant, which had been an abandoned bus station; Ms. Bailey's Country Captain chicken; burrata served with pecan pesto; Rafe Rivers and his wife, Ansley West Rivers (with their daughter, Emmalou), provide the Grey with organic vegetables.



PECAN PESTO

ADAPTED FROM MASHAMA BAILEY, THE GREY, SAVANNAH, GA.
TIME: 10 MINUTES
YIELD: 1 CUP

- 1 small clove garlic
- 1 cup fresh basil leaves
- 1 cup fresh Thai basil leaves
- 1 cup fresh opal basil leaves (or substitute more basil)
- ½ cup pecans, toasted
- ½ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 tablespoons freshly grated pecorino Romano or Parmesan
- Salt

1. Put garlic in the bowl of a food processor and pulse to break it into smaller pieces.
2. Add basil and pecans to the processor. With the machine running, slowly add the olive oil and purée until mixture is mostly smooth.
3. Transfer pesto to a bowl and stir in grated cheese. Season to taste with salt.

seafood through his Valona Shrimp Company. A massive pot materialized. Cages full of blue crabs and stone crabs were hauled in dripping from the nearby marsh. Chilled bottles of riesling and pink sparkling Austrian pinot noir were popped open. Thunder drummed overhead.

Before long, Ms. Bailey was digging into a full-on Lowcountry boil, with crabs and shrimp and knobs of sausage and cobs of corn and knuckles of those fresh-dug potatoes piled up on a table under the oaks.

If she had had any ambivalence about coming back to Savannah, the look on her face suggested that it had evaporated.

"At this particular moment?" she asked. "This is good."

from working the line at Prune. "I am just surprised at myself — super-surprised that I've been able to pull it off," she said. "Whenever someone comes to me with a question, I'm like, 'Oh, yeah, I'm the boss.'"

That's only normal, Ms. Hamilton said.

"I think a lot of women, frankly, suffer that anyway, and she's no different," she said. "To be an authority figure in your own kitchen, I think we all struggle with that in the beginning. It's part of becoming a real chef: a real chef and restaurant owner."

Ms. Bailey is still learning about the South and the centuries-old etiquette of a place like Savannah, where not much gets done without an introduction from someone who is part of the fabric of the city. She has met Cynthia Hayes, the James Beard Award-winning force behind the Southeastern African American Farmers Organic Network. Through people like Ms. Hayes, she has met farmers and purveyors who now provide her with everything from local Harris Neck oysters to eggplants, honey and fresh-dug potatoes. She has learned