

LIVING & ARTS



Chef Matthew Raiford explains the history of Union School built on 1 acre of Gilliard Farms. From 1907-1955, the one-room school served as the only school for black children in a 25-mile radius. Raiford's uncles, aunts and grandmother all studied there. CONTRIBUTED BY SANJEEV AND UMA CHATTERJEE

'I always loved the food that I came from'

Chef-farmer

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making a statement across the country: black chefs like New York native Mashama Bailey of the Grey in Savannah or Florida chef Edouardo Jordan, who now runs two successful concepts in Seattle.

"I think that we are very similar (in the way) we are trying to show our foodways for what they are," Raiford says. "They're part of a national story that has been pushed to the wayside. Now it's coming forward."

This national food story links a fraught past to bountiful flavor and has been rising in awareness not just throughout the South but across the country. Eating at Raiford's table, with wild-grown herbs flavoring sauces, jellies made from last season's fruit, and squash grown within yards of the house, renews the idea that there's much to learn from land-based knowledge, and from the human capacity to fashion flavorful food out of scarcity.

"You talking about farming?" Raiford recalls the grandmother he called Nana saying to him when he told her about organic agriculture. "Wait. You went to school to learn what we already know how to do?"

Raiford did indeed go to school to learn about organic agriculture at the University of Santa Cruz Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Foods in California. But first, after nearly 10 years in the U.S. Army and an early interest in pursuing physical therapy at Howard University, he engaged his keen focus on food and went to culinary school, initially at Leesburg, Virginia, then at the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, New York.

It was a good decision: Raiford has gone on to receive national attention not only by the James Beard Foundation but the notice of chefs such as Alice Waters, whose presence at this year's Georgia Organics conference comes at his behest. (Georgia Organics is an organization that supports best practices for organic farmers, eaters and gardeners in Georgia.) Mentors close to home helped shape his journey.

"I think I would have followed my culinary career down a different path if I had never met chef Joe Randall in Savannah." Randall, noted for mentoring culinary professionals, is a member of the African American Chefs Hall of Fame with a 53-plus-year history of making magic with Southern cuisine.

"Uncle Joe" Randall, as he is called, encouraged Raiford to build from what he knew. "He showed me that I could embrace my culinary roots."

To Raiford, that meant the flavors of the Gullah Geechee, a culture descending from enslaved Africans originally from the rice-growing region of West Africa.

"I always loved the food that I came from. I just loved it. Growing up, I had my Nana, my great-grandmother, my dad — all these people cooking around me."

Raiford, whose father was a pro-



Hibiscus gin-glazed pork loin was cooked sous-vide alongside spaghetti squash in the food lab at Gilliard Farms. Chef Matthew Raiford espouses new technology alongside regard for history. CONTRIBUTED BY NINA MUKERJEE FURSTENAU

fessional baker, was inspired by waking to a house scented by fresh apple and cinnamon. "My dad made these really light apple turnover pastries. You can't beat that."

Tactile memory of baking aromas, of making syrup from sugar cane raised on the farm, of running through Georgia woodlands, creates the flavor profile for Raiford the chef. More, his past makes him at ease on the land.

"I just planted these," he says, raking his hands through soil to replant garlic bulbs recently pecked free. "This is what a chicken does."

Where the Wild Things Are

In addition to the uprooted garlic, a variety of vegetables, and fruit trees, magic happens each season on a section of Gilliard Farms that the family calls Where the Wild Things Are. Walking through with roosters crowing, Raiford pulls back a young milk thistle that will be harvested this spring for tincture.

"This one will be one of the strong ones," he says with satisfaction. "It'll probably grow to have a head like this," and his hands spread about 12 inches.

So many edibles are unknown, he says. But growing up outside, running the farm, made him more aware than most of abundance.

"I was like a bull in the woods," Raiford says, "running through grabbing things to eat: sour grass to quench my thirst, pawpaw, Southern huckleberries, blackberries, everything."

A new venture adds the skills of his partner, Jovan Sage, herbalist, doula, and proprietor of Sage's Larder, to the creation of a smooth gin with farm-grown hibiscus, an age-old Gullah Geechee ingredient. The two launched Gullah Geechee Gin in partnership with Justin Douglas of Simple Man Distillery in Atlanta in January

(available in Atlanta at Total Wine, Tower Beer Wine & Spirits, Green's and other locations updated at smdistillery.com). They aim for 3,000 bottles by June and are completing the organic certification process.

Raiford shakes out scratchy hibiscus buds from a paper envelope to show the latest harvest. A flush of purple on the straw-colored husks is still evident as small bumpy black seeds spill out.

"Jovan harvests all the botanicals for the gin from the farm, except for the juniper, which she sources organically."

The harvest of wild-grown plants and saving seeds are not new to Gilliard Farms.

"In U.S. history, black farmers didn't have access to the pre-coated 'better' seed. My grandfathers always saved seed."

Restrictions for black farmers led to an appreciation for what the land provided. As the sixth generation on the farm, with his children as its seventh, Raiford and his sister Althea, also a U.S. military veteran, an amazing cook, and deft work partner at planting and harvesting time, own 30 acres of the original 474-acre farm established by their great-great-great-grandfather Jupiter Gilliard in 1874. Today, it is one of just over 35,000 farms owned by black Americans, out of a total of over 2 million farms in the U.S., according to the USDA 2017 Census of Agriculture released in October.

This number, less than 2% of all farms, has fallen from a peak in 1920 of 14%, and is increasingly attributed to legal mechanisms and racist policies, according to sources such as Summer Sewell in the *Guardian*, and Leah Penniman in her book "Farming While Black," among others.

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RECIPE

EFFIE'S SHRIMP PERLOO

Perloo is a Lowcountry shellfish and rice dish. Similar to jambalaya and paella, it starts with a flavorful base of rice simmered with garlic, onion and bell peppers.

"When I was a kid, my mom used to make this dish often for family gatherings and potluck events," said chef-farmer Matthew Raiford. "It was her way of stretching food for us at home, and also saying thank you to whoever was hosting the family gathering or potluck because it was obviously homemade. Who goes out and buys seafood for a potluck?"

SHRIMP PERLOO

- 2 tablespoons butter
- 1 yellow onion, finely diced
- 3 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 green bell pepper, finely diced
- 1 red or orange bell pepper, finely diced
- 1 tablespoon red pepper flakes
- 2 cups cooked rice
- 1 quart seafood stock (recipe follows) (if using store-bought seafood stock, add the juice of 1 lemon to the stock)
- 2 pounds large Georgia white shrimp, peeled and deveined (use heads and shells to prepare seafood stock)
- Sea salt and pepper to taste

Heat the butter in a large cast-iron skillet over medium heat. Stir in the onion, garlic, bell peppers, red pepper flakes and rice. Stir to coat with butter, let cook about 2 minutes, then add the stock. Bring to a boil, cover, decrease the heat to low and let simmer 15 minutes. Add the shrimp, give the rice a good stir, and let cook 5-7 minutes more. Check to ensure shrimp are fully cooked. Serve with hot sauce. Serves 4-6.

Per serving, based on 4: 543 calories (percent of calories from fat, 29), 50 grams protein, 38 grams carbohydrates, 3 grams fiber, 16 grams fat (8 grams saturated), 377 milligrams cholesterol, 852 milligrams sodium.

SEAFOOD STOCK

- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- Heads and shells from 2 pounds large Georgia white shrimp
- 1 carrot, rough chopped
- 2 celery ribs, rough chopped
- 1 teaspoon red pepper flakes
- 2 teaspoons sea salt
- 2 bay leaves
- Juice of 1 lemon
- 1 ½ quarts water

Melt the butter in a medium stockpot over medium-high heat. Add the shrimp heads and shells, the carrot and celery, and saute until the shrimp shells turn pink. Add the red pepper flakes, salt, bay leaves, lemon juice and water and bring to a boil. Decrease the heat to low and let simmer 25 minutes. Remove the stock from the stove and, using a fine mesh strainer, strain the stock into a large container. Makes 1 quart.