

LIVING & ARTS

Silty-sandy loam holds multiple histories

Chef-farmer

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Cooking lab

Interest in the legacy of the land is evident in what Raiford calls his cooking lab, a room lined with cookbooks and jars filled with dried botanicals. Bottle labels read Comfrey Leaf, Yerba Mate, Thyme, Brown Mustard, Echinacea Purpurea, and many more. A jar labeled Hoodoo sits next to a stainless-steel canister marked “clean spoons.” There’s a large plastic bag containing nettle leaf, and a cookbook open to pages that outline “scheduling sourdough in the kitchen.”

Raiford casually produces an exquisite meal of hibiscus gin-glazed pork loin, cinnamon-roasted spaghetti squash, orange- and ghee-glazed sweet potatoes, and a mushroom and pepper saute, using sous vide equipment. He dishes out warm biscuits from a cast-iron pan, and serves them with farm-made blueberry, lemon and thyme jelly. This after uprooting the sweet potatoes by hand in the field and replanting the garlic.

The man can multitask. After being the executive chef of Haute Catering in Washington, D.C., at the U.S. House of Representatives and trying his hand at operating, and subsequently closing, the Farmer’s Larder and Strong Roots Provisions restaurants in Brunswick, among other work experiences, Raiford now plans to focus on where he started: events on the farm, pop-ups across the country, and the new gin venture. (Announcements for farm events and pop-ups will be posted on his Facebook and Instagram pages (Facebook: Matthew Raiford, Instagram: @chefarmermatthew).

“In the beginning, my grandmother was part of all the farm event preparations,” he says. “Doing this work again feels right.”

As a member of the board of directors of Georgia Organics, Raiford planned a new Black Farmer Prosperity track at its annual conference Feb. 7-8 in Athens. His session with Sage, “Collards Aren’t the New Kale,” was, in a sense, about authenticity.

“Oftentimes, we try to jump on a bandwagon of whatever is hot. What I am consistently looking at is what grows well in our soil and what do people want to eat.”

Sage adds, “And, how do you stay culturally relevant and not colonize people’s diets?”

This is sustainability for Raiford, plus one other critical issue.

“We’ve fought nature so much that we’ve killed the soil. We’ve killed all the micro-organisms that are in the soil that were regenerating it,” he says. Raiford works mightily to address this issue with foods in sync with the region.

This means it isn’t all soil and toil. For Raiford, Gullah Geechee means seafood.

“I grew up eating a mess of fish or shrimp and greens,” he says. Fresh, tasty, with no cloudy eyes and wan-colored skin in sight – these were not your grocery store fish. What showed up off the coastal Georgia waters were the highlight of the family table.

“Being on the coast, it wasn’t about raising cattle.”

What it was about was tributaries, streams, creeks and “lots of ocean.” Raiford, who knows how to cast a net into the ocean and pull back bounty, grew up seining and making crab baskets off the St. Simons Island Pier.

“I know how to fish with a cane pole. I know how to fish with a rod and reel. I know how to fish with nets. Now, I’m getting ready to add fly-fishing to my repertoire.”



Fresh made biscuits are baked in a cast iron skillet at Chef Matthew Raiford’s farm kitchen. He serves them with farm-made blueberry, lemon and thyme jelly. CONTRIBUTED BY NINA MUKERJEE FURSTENAU

Antiquity now

The farm’s nearly 150 years of organic non-GMO practices, due in part to a history of barred access and the expense of chemicals, is now reaping rewards. Even with a generation gap between his grandfather’s time and his, Raiford sees the way forward is steeped in the past.

“When I first heard of dry farming, I was like, ‘Oh, you mean like the original way people farmed?’ I grew up with that. I thought that everybody had to farm that way unless you had a lot of money for irrigation.”

With words like regenerative agriculture and dry farming rising in use, Raiford wants to close the knowledge gap from previous generations.

“We aren’t that far removed from that land-based knowledge. I see my role in that gap. There are some amazing chefs out there starting to talk about everything from eating your weeds to using tillage radishes as part of the meal.”

Developments touted as new, such as adding fish bones to compost to increase the calcium content and reduce risk of nematodes that kill roots, was something he watched his grandfather do, though without the same vocabulary.

“These techniques have been here all along. As the saying goes, nothing gets old but clothes and those come back.”

Raiford, who often wears red-framed glasses, heavy work pants that can withstand snagging on plants or equipment, and T-shirts to fit the Georgia weather, pauses to pick up what he calls his snake stick to walk the farm.

“It’s a Mossberg.”

Despite the precaution of carrying his firearm made by the Mossberg company, no snakes appear even though the open land in Where the Wild Things Are and a magnificent Spanish oak dripping moss suggest that they could. Oyster shells dot the garden from a recent oyster roast held on tin sheets of roofing. A few unmoored garlic bulbs remain scattered about, forgotten by the crowing roosters. Several homes dot the edges of the acreage and a dip permanently falls away from what used to be the Southern Railways track running near the Spanish oak.

In addition to the wild things on the property, behind Matthew Raiford’s house there are chicken houses, and beyond that, tilled space that supports an orchard, greens, sugar cane, sumac. He has plans for more. This year: shallots, garlic, peas, sweet potatoes. The old sugarcane press is set up near the house, and though the wood-beamed turnstile is no longer rotated by a mule but by a riding lawnmower, the resulting molasses will be thick and dark and bottled once again for family use.

There’s an old schoolhouse on the property that was the only school for black children for a 25-mile radius from 1907-1955. Raiford’s uncles, aunts and grandmother all studied there; his mother was of the first generation that did not. The family gave up an acre of land for the school and were at the ready with food from the farm for the children who attended from such great distances.

“We wanted to make sure that everybody got to eat.”



Gullah Geechee Gin, created by chef Matthew Raiford, Jovan Sage and Justin Douglas of Simple Man Distillery, uses hibiscus and other botanical ingredients from Gilliard Farms. CONTRIBUTED

Feeding people was ingrained. The silty-sandy loam at Gilliard Farms holds multiple histories, and Raiford lives out one of them in sync with the land and the food it provides.

Nina Mukerjee Furstenu is a journalist and author of the award-winning book “Biting Through the Skin: An Indian Kitchen in America’s Heartland.” She is editor of the FoodStory book series at the University of Iowa Press and her essays can be found at ninafurstenu.com.

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Matthew Raiford

RECIPE

SATSUMA ORANGE GLAZED SWEET POTATOES

“I am always trying something new with the Instapot because it makes meals so quick and delicious with just a few ingredients. I also don’t have to stand over the stove, especially when I need to get crops in the ground or it’s harvest time,” said chef-farmer

Matthew Raiford.

If you don’t have an Instapot or other pressure cooker, Raiford offers stovetop instructions.

- 2 pounds sweet potatoes, peeled and cut into medium dice**
- 2 tablespoons ghee (substitute with unsalted butter)**
- Juice of 3 satsuma oranges**

2 teaspoons pink Himalayan salt

Combine all the ingredients and place into an Instapot pressure cooker. Cook 6 minutes, following manufacturer instructions. Release pressure valve when done.

Stovetop method: Add ¼ cup water to a saute pan over heat on medium.

Add the sweet potatoes, ghee, satsuma juice and salt to the pan, stirring to combine. Cook 20 minutes, or until the potatoes become tender. Serves 6-8.

Per serving, based on 6: 170 calories (percent of calories from fat, 25), 2 grams protein, 30 grams carbohydrates, 4 grams fiber, 5 grams fat (3 grams saturated), 12 milligrams cholesterol, 643 milligrams sodium.

