SIMI KANG, ADVOCATE FOR ASIAN AMERICAN FISHERFOLK

One of the scholars who has been advising “Somewhere South” is Simi Kang, a postdoctoral fellow at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pa. Her deep knowledge as an ethnographer has shaped how we share these communities’ stories, especially in the “What a Pickle” episode and next week’s “It’s a Greens Thing” episode.

Kang’s research focuses on Asian American communities in the American South deeply integral to the food industry. She’s spent time with the Vietnamese- and Cambodian-American fisherfolk in and around New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. She works as a grant writer and advocate for Coastal Communities Consulting, a nonprofit that serves southeast Louisiana’s commercial fisherfolk and their families. Kang has written about these communities in Gravy, a publication of the Southern Foodways Alliance, in an article titled: “An Industry’s Heartbeat: Louisiana’s Southeast Asian American fisherwomen foster a way of life.” In Hyphen, a nonprofit news and culture magazine that tells the stories of Asian America, Kang wrote about a farming cooperative in the Vietnamese community in New Orleans: “Feeding Versailles: The Versailles Vietnamese American community responds to and rebuilds in the wake of Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill.” With those stories in mind, we asked her a few questions.

What sparked your interest in these communities in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast?
I'm from Minneapolis. As a young person, I didn't really have a clear sense of my own identity as an Indian American. It took finding a community of Asian American activists and organizers, many of whom were Southeast Asian American. Those folks became my chosen family. A few of those friends had gone to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina to help rebuild the Vietnamese American community. So that's how I first learned about the community. I decided that South Louisiana would be a great place to be thinking critically about labor, race and immigration issues in Southeast Asian American communities. So I transitioned my work down there.

How did these folks come to that area and become involved in the fishing industry? Were they involved in the fishing industry in Vietnam?
Each family's story is different. A lot of the first wave of refugees who were brought to the United States after the U.S. engagement in Vietnam between 1975 and the late 1970s usually were more resourced than people who came after them. So they hadn't necessarily been working in commercial fishing or other food industries but had other kinds of income in Vietnam. This is what folks have told me: when they got to Louisiana, commercial fishing was a place where they didn't necessarily need to know English. So people started working on existing boats captained by white Louisianians, African-American Louisianians, etc. It was paid day labor. In the '70s and '80s, commercial fishing was a pretty good business. You could make a decent amount of money on a two- or three-day trip. People were able to save a fair amount and subsequently buy their own boats. And then fishing became central to the economy of the Vietnamese American community. Then folks who came later and did have fishing knowledge had a leg up because people already in the industry could give them loans to buy their own boats. Over time, it just became really important to the community. It's also worth noting that it wasn't just men working on the boats. Women were working shifts as seafood processors, shucking oysters and deheading shrimp. In many homes, both parents were working in seafood in some way.

Were there particular challenges that these communities faced in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005?
When the Vietnamese refugees were resettled in New Orleans, they were actually brought there by the Catholic church. In 1975, everybody was put in one housing complex in New Orleans East called Versailles Arms. Folks created a community around that area. It is physically isolated from New Orleans proper and so people had to become self sufficient because they weren't really receiving resources. So New Orleans East wasn't hit as hard by Hurricane Katrina as other spots of the city, but it was a part of the 85 percent of the city that was underwater. Their homes in New Orleans East needed repair and then their boats were also completely in disrepair down at the docks, which are sometimes 2 ½ hours away. There were no resources to fix both. A lot of people just never went back to commercial shrimping or commercial fishing after that. Then in the months that followed Hurricane Katrina, the mayor at the time zoned a spot just two miles down the road from the New Orleans East community to put all of the Katrina waste. They put a landfill basically in the community's backyard. It's highly toxic. It's not what you want anywhere near where your kids breathe, let alone in your groundwater or especially for this community when people are growing kitchen gardens in almost every backyard. That move was accurately identified as an act of environmental racism. There's actually an excellent documentary called "A Village called Versailles" that was made about the community's response to this landfill.

Five years later, those folks who survived Katrina to continue working in commercial fishing were affected by the BP oil spill. What happened?
BP happened a few days into one of the two shrimp seasons that the folks I work with rely on for their annual income. So they had to get out of the water and they lost 50 percent of their income. Then the subsequent season some of them still couldn't go out because they were in so much debt that they effectively lost a full year of income. Folks had to go on unemployment and get food stamps, which was a particularly difficult process in some cases because of language barriers.

You talked about how women often worked in the seafood processing but one of your stories really goes into how these women are integral business partners with their husbands who were often working on the boats. Can you talk a little bit about their role, especially in the aftermaths of these two events?
It's worth mentioning that these women aren't just doing the care labor in the home, they are usually working at least one job and they are acutely knowledgeable about commercial fishing. They can get on the boats and help their family members who own the boats. They're almost always the people who deal with the finances of the business. I found the women in these communities really have their hand in every area of their families' lives — economic life, cultural life, communal life. It's really the women who mobilize the industry.

When I was living in New Orleans, Baton Rouge flooded pretty badly in 2016 and there's a big Southeast Asian community there as well. My boss, who is knowledgeable about disaster relief, said: 'We need to get people food.' A bunch of fishermen contributed a percentage of their income for that month and we raised several thousand dollars in a few hours. My boss used that money to buy bags of rice, fish sauce, ramen and other culturally-appropriate staple foods because the food banks didn't have things that the community needed to feed their families. We got all of that to Baton Rouge and then the people who showed up to distribute it were the mothers, the sisters, the aunts. They're really doing the labor of keeping the community together, especially after a disaster.

You wrote about the VEGGI Farmers Cooperative in New Orleans East. It sounds like there was already this base of gardening knowledge within the community. Is that true?
I remember my boss telling me that there was a constant search for space to grow food at the housing development in New Orleans East. That wasn't a part of the thought process when Vietnamese refugees were resettled there. Nobody thought these people will need to grow food. So aunties were making their own gardens under stairwells and finding other ways to grow food. As people started having homes and lawns, they were more able to kind of supplement what they could find at the grocery store.

What led to the farmers' cooperative?
There were so many elders who were left economically stranded after the BP oil spill. Two young men, Daniel Nguyen and Khai Nguyen, went to Mary Queen of Viet Nam, the Catholic church in the community, and said, 'We need a grant to start teaching the elders who are now off the water how to grow food economically.' It was really founded as a safe place for folks who had to get off the water after BP. They had to do a lot of experimentation to figure out how to grow at enough scale where people could earn paychecks. What they found was that the farm ended up serving two purposes. The primary income was from non-Asian restaurants in New Orleans that needed really good salad

greens and local vegetables. And then the local corner stores as well as the farmers' friends and family were asking for particular kinds of culturally appropriate vegetables and Vietnamese herbs.

How is the COVID-19 pandemic affecting these fisherfolk?
Under COVID-19 shelter-in-place orders and given how fraught the restaurant economy is, commercial fisherfolk can't sell anything they catch right now. This is another big disaster happening just at the beginning of a shrimping season, and Coastal Communities Consulting is prioritizing getting everyone enrolled in unemployment and helping fishers get access to Small Business Association disaster funding.

While our community of food producers is unable to do their jobs, as I said before, many of them cultivate gardens at home. One fisherman we have worked with for years grows all of the produce you can think of in a lot next to his house, including squash and greens, potatoes, eggplant, okra, herbs, and citrus trees. He is well known in his community in Buras, La. for giving away food. My boss spoke to him the other day about how he is using his garden. He said that he tends his garden every day and leaves cut produce out for his community. He isn't interested in selling what he grows elsewhere or charging anyone for food. He just wants his neighbors to feel like they can care for themselves and their families in such uncertain times.

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

Somewhere South has been made possible in part by a major grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities: Exploring the human endeavor.

SOUTH CAROLINA etv PRESENTS
UNC TV

MARKAY MEDIA
©2020 Markay Media. All Rights Reserved.

SOMEWHERE SOUTH
with CHEF VIVIAN HOWARD

TYPES OF PICKLES

There are three types of pickles as Vivian Howard learned while preparing for her lecture at the Chow Chow Festival in Asheville last year. Howard received assistance for her lecture from KC Hysmith, a food studies doctoral student in the American Studies Department at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Hysmith wrote: “Food historians trace the process of pickling (preserving foods in salt/brine or vinegar) back to Ancient Egypt. Egyptians were known to have pickled fish and melons. If you mean the pickling of cucumbers (what we Americans usually call pickles today) that practice perhaps dates back to India,

Map design by Margaret McNealy

about 3,000 years ago, where the cucumber also traces its origins. Some food historians say William Beuklez, a Dutch fisherman invented pickled foods in the 15th century. Dill pickles were introduced by German immigrants. Sweet pickles come from Central and northern Europe. Bread and butter pickles are an early 20th century development (supposedly invented during the Great Depression)."

With that overview, here's a breakdown on the types of pickles:

FERMENTED PICKLES:

vegetables that have been preserved and transformed with the help of good bacteria. Typically, you salt shredded vegetables, which produces its own brine and encourage the development of lactic acid bacteria. That's how we get kimchi and sauerkraut. Fermented pickles also can be made with a salt brine; think Kosher dill pickles or half sour pickles or those pickled carrots you find on the condiment bar at your favorite taqueria.

VINEGAR PICKLES:

vegetables that have been preserved in a vinegar brine. The acid in the vinegar (and in the lactic acid bacteria in fermented pickles) preserves the vegetables and prevents bad bacteria from developing. Some of our favorite vinegar pickles include bread-and-butter pickles, dilly beans and pickled okra.

OIL PICKLES:

an Indian preservation method using oil; in North India, they typically use mustard oil and in South India, they use sesame oil.

If you want to learn how to make pickles, check out these books:

- **"The Art of Fermentation: An In-Depth Exploration of Essential Concepts and Processes from around the World," by Sandor Katz (Chelsea Green Publishing, 2012). This is a great in-depth resource on the science behind fermentation.**
- **Any of the Ball Books of Canning and Preserving are good for first-time canners who want to make pickles or jams.**
- **The "Pickles & Preserves" cookbook by our co-producer, Andrea Weigl (UNC Press, 2012).**
- **We love this self-published book, "Usha's Pickle Digest: The Perfect Pickle Recipe Book," by India's Pickle Queen, Usha Prabakaran, who was recently profiled in the New York Times.**

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

Somewhere South has been made possible in part by a major grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities: Exploring the human endeavor.

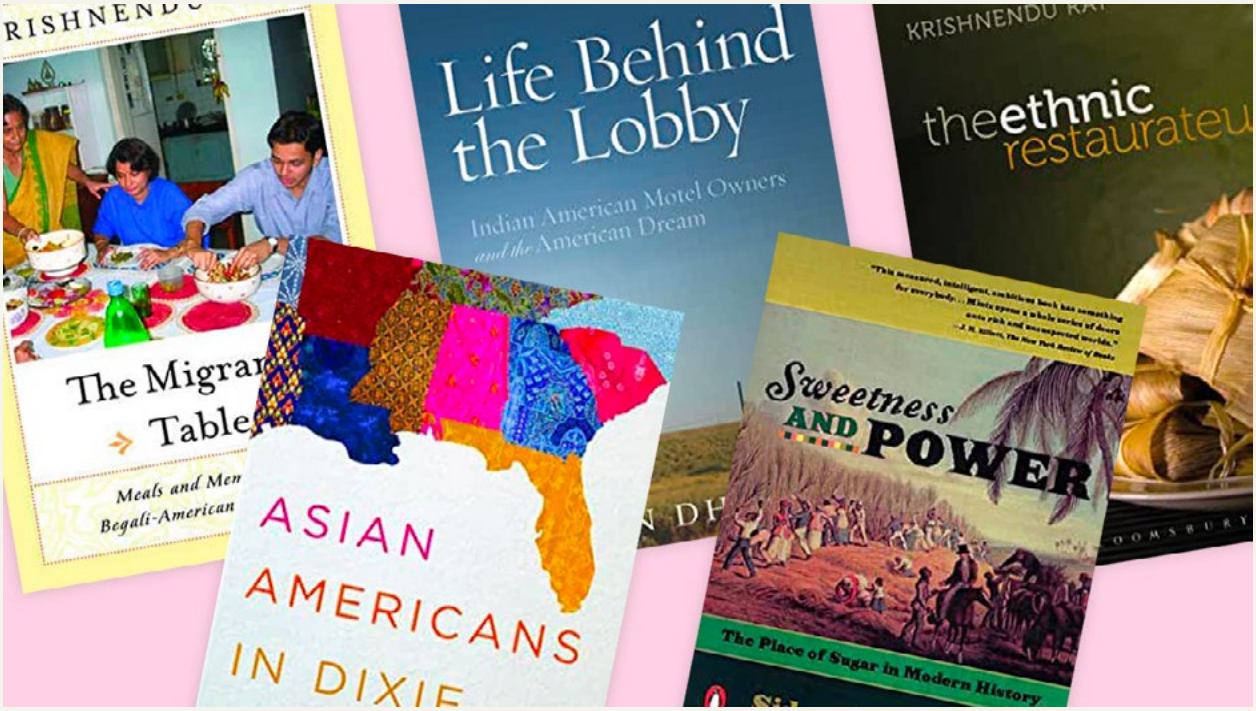
SOUTH CAROLINA etv PRESENTS UNC TV

MARKAY MEDIA

©2020 Markay Media. All Rights Reserved.

SOMEWHERE SOUTH
with CHEF VIVIAN HOWARD

PICKLE EPISODE READING LIST



With the help of our amazing board of advisors and scholars, we dug into the scholarship related to each of our episode themes. For each episode, we share a short list of some of the most helpful books and essays we found that helped shape our understanding of the evolution of Southern foodways.

"Life Behind the Lobby: Indian American Motel Owners and the American Dream," by Pawan Dhingra from Stanford University Press, 2012.
Indian Americans own about half of all the motels in the United States. This book explores Indian Americans' accomplishments and marginalization and examines their own role in sustaining that duality.

"Asian Americans in Dixie: Race and Migration in the South," co-editors Khyati Joshi and Jigna Desai, from University of Illinois Press, 2013.
This interdisciplinary collection highlights the growing Asian American populations in the South and challenges the limited prism through which the region's race and ethnicity are often viewed as one of black-white relations.

"The Ethnic Restaurateur," by Krishnendu Ray from Bloomsbury Academic, 2016.
An academic book that has become essential reading in the field of food studies that explores the experience, work and dreams of immigrants working in the hospitality industry. Ray crunches the numbers, too, demonstrating how the opportunities for culinary education and career leadership are skewed among the categories of race, gender and ethnicity.

"The Migrant's Table: Meals and Memories in Bengali-American Households," by Krishnendu Ray from Temple University Press, 2004.
A look at the evolving food habits of Bengali immigrants to the United States against the backdrop of globalization, modernization, ethnicity, and identity.

"Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History" by Sidney Mintz from Penguin Random House, 1986.
Since this episode is so focused on colonial transits of food and power, this book is a great companion read. It shows how Europeans and Americans transformed sugar from a rare luxury to a commonplace necessity and how it changed the history of capitalism and industry.

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

Somewhere South has been made possible in part by a major grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities: Exploring the human endeavor.

SOUTH CAROLINA etv PRESENTS
UNC TV

MARKAY MEDIA
©2020 Markay Media. All Rights Reserved.

GREEN TOMATO & WATERMELON RIND ACHAAR

This recipe from chef Cheetie Kumar of Garland in Raleigh, N.C., who replaced mango in mango pickle with green tomatoes and watermelon rinds.

Note: *for best results, prepare two days before eating. Mustard oil is sold at Indian markets; it cannot be substituted and should not be omitted.*

INGREDIENTS

For the tomatoes & watermelon rinds:

3 to 4 pounds firm green tomatoes
1 ½ cups (5 ounces) watermelon rinds, green skin removed and ripe flesh cut away from the white rind
¼ cup plus 2 tablespoons kosher salt
½ cup white distilled vinegar

more ingredients next page >

INGREDIENTS (CONTINUED)

½ cup apple cider vinegar
½ cup sugar

For the achaar:
¼ cup canola or grapeseed oil
1 tablespoon mustard oil
½ teaspoon ground fenugreek seeds
2 teaspoons ground nigella (kalonji) seeds
1 tablespoon ground fennel seeds
2 teaspoons ground turmeric
¼ teaspoon Indian chili powder, or substitute cayenne
5 ounces jaggery, or substitute 2 ounces granulated sugar and 1 ounce light brown sugar
2 tablespoons kosher salt
¼ cup distilled white vinegar

DIRECTIONS

Prepare the tomatoes & watermelon rinds: Cut the tomatoes and rinds into batons; keep separate. Toss the tomatoes with ¼ cup salt, then place in a colander for 3 to 4 hours or refrigerate overnight. Toss the rinds with the remaining 2 tablespoons salt and cover with cold water; refrigerate overnight.

The next day, drain any juices from the tomatoes. Set aside.

Then drain and rinse the rinds and boil the rinds in fresh water for 5 minutes. Drain and rinse the rinds once more. Combine the vinegars and sugar; bring to a boil, then reduce the heat to medium-low. Add the rinds to the brine and cook until clear. Remove from the heat and drain, discarding brine.

more directions next page >

DIRECTIONS (CONTINUED)

Make the achaar: In a wok or deep, nonreactive skillet, add both oils and heat until very hot but not smoking. Working quickly, add the fenugreek, immediately followed by the nigella and fennel. As soon as they are sizzling, add the turmeric, chili powder, jaggery, and salt. Stir well until dissolved and fragrant. Add the rinds and cook for 2 to 3 minutes. Add the tomatoes and continue cooking for 1 to 2 minutes more. Add the vinegar and bring to a boil over high heat. Transfer to a clean, dry heatproof bowl and let cool to room temperature. (The pickle will taste very salty at this point; it will balance out in 24 to 36 hours.) For best results, place the pickle in a resealable plastic bag with all the air pushed out, lay flat in a container, and refrigerate for up to 2 weeks.

Yield: makes 1 quart

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

Somewhere South has been made possible in part by a major grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities: Exploring the human endeavor.

SOUTH CAROLINA etv PRESENTS
UNC TV

MARKAY MEDIA
©2020 Markay Media. All Rights Reserved.