



ADRIAN MILLER, SOUL FOOD SAVANT



Photo Courtesy of Tyrus Ortega Gaines for Harvey B. Gantt Center

Adrian Miller's path to becoming a biographer of African American food histories was not straight nor narrow. The Colorado-based lawyer-turned-writer has followed his curiosity for soulful cuisine around the country, documenting endangered stories of Black foodways and unsung culinary trailblazers. His book, "[Soul Food: The Surprising Story of an American Cuisine](#)," took home the 2014 James Beard book award for reference and scholarship, while his follow-up, "[The President's Kitchen Cabinet: The Story of the African Americans Who Have Fed Our First Families, From the Washingtons to the Obamas](#)," received an NAACP Image Award nomination and high praise from food scholars and American history buffs alike.

In "Somewhere South," Adrian joined Vivian for a barbecue tour of eastern North Carolina where vinegar-based, whole-hog pork is king.

We recently caught up with Adrian as he's quarantined at his Denver home, working on his third book, "Black Smoke," exploring the history of African American barbecue culture.

Can you give us a little bit about your background? How did your interest in food scholarship come about? How did you become the “soul food scholar?”

The short answer is “unemployment.” I had just finished a stint in the Clinton White House, and I was trying to get back to Colorado to begin a career in politics. The job market was slow, and I ended up watching a lot of daytime television. In the depth of my depravity, I said to myself, “I should read something.” I went to a local bookstore, and while browsing, I came across a copy of John Egerton’s [“Southern Food: At Home, On the Road, In History.”](#) Early in that book, Egerton wrote (paraphrasing) that the tribute to African American in cooking had yet to be written. That started my journey, and I wanted to specialize in my traditional food, which is soul food.

And for reference, how do you define “soul food?”

Soul food is one of the traditional African American cuisines that blends the culinary traditions of West Africa, Western Europe, and the Americas. Black migrants from the American South took cuisine all across the U.S.

What are the indisputable elements of BBQ?

To me, it’s meat, wood, charcoal, and sauce.

What are the more debatable elements of BBQ?

Endless possibilities here, but I’ll say what type of meat, wood preferences, whether or not sauce should be included, and the side dishes.

During the filming of this episode, you came down to eastern North Carolina to sample whole hog barbecue for the first time! What were the most interesting parts of your barbecue tour with Vivian?

I was fascinated by the whole hog barbecuing process. To see the artistry up close was really impressive. I really enjoyed watching the preparation process at [Skylight Inn](#). Seeing the steaming meat and crispy pork skin rhythmically chopped, periodically doused with a spicy vinegar sauce, flipped around, and chopped up again was food choreography at its best. The turkey barbecue at [Boogie’sTurkey BBQ](#) was also cool to see. Turkey as a pork substitute is huge in soul food circles, and I’ve seen the same trend at African American-owned barbecue joints around the country. It was cool to see turkey get the traditional North Carolina treatment.

I know you and Vivian talked about this, but I’d appreciate you expanding on it. Could you talk a bit more about the trajectory of barbecue itself? How it became contemporarily popular and how Black folks went from being barbecue ambassadors to muted in the barbecue conversation?

Barbecue was Native American in origin, and then it was melded with European and African culinary practices. In time, African Americans became barbecue’s standard-bearers because they were the cuisine’s principal cooks. In many situations, African American barbecuers kickstarted the barbecue scenes in many communities across the country. In recent times, making barbecue has been transformed from menial culinary work to a craft that’s cool. Barbecue’s reframing has shifted the focus away from African Americans to white barbecuers.

In your humble, learned opinion, what's the difference between a barbecue and a cookout?

I can see why people get it twisted because both usually involve getting together outdoors with family and/or friends for a good time. A barbecue happens when the food is cooked for a long period of time, so it's going to involve brisket, chicken, hot links, pork shoulder, and or pork spareribs. A cookout is more about grilling, and involves a much shorter cooking time. I'm expecting to see hamburgers and hot dogs at a cookout.

In your travels and research, what places are the current hubs for BBQ?

I'd say the current hubs are: Atlanta, Austin, Chicago (especially the South Side), Houston, Kansas City, Memphis, Los Angeles, Raleigh/Durham (North Carolina), and St. Louis.

Tell us a bit about your upcoming book!

My forthcoming book, "[Black Smoke](#)," is a celebration of African American barbecue: the cuisine, the culture that surrounds it, and profiles of the cooks who made it all possible. It's a strong reminder that the story of barbecue in the United States can't be told without including African Americans as a central part of the narrative. It is scheduled to be published by the University of North Carolina Press in spring 2021.



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.*



MARKAY MEDIA
©2020 Markay Media. All Rights Reserved.

SOMEWHERE SOUTH

with CHEF VIVIAN HOWARD

THE JAPANESE SHOKUNIN SPIRIT IS A JOURNEY TOWARD PERFECTION



In "[How Do You 'Cue?](#)," an indulgent barbecue picnic in Lockhart with brothers and restaurateurs Tatsu and Shion Aikawa offers a true melding of cultures, as Vivian learns about their experience immigrating to Texas from Tokyo while they all feast on brisket and bento boxes. As a chef, Tatsu marries these incredible cultures through smoke and fire at [Kemuri Tatsu-ya](#), his popular Austin izakaya. And it seems so effortless. But in the picnic scene (which you can [watch here](#) on PBS), his brother Shion explains that their approach to barbecue lends itself to the Japanese shokunin spirit. "As in, you're continuously doing the same thing, but little by little tweaking it to create an ultimate product," says Shion.

For fans of food documentaries, this may ring a bell. The shokunin spirit often comes up when fans of "[Jiro Dreams of Sushi](#)," about Japanese sushi chef Jiro Ono, analyze the octogenarian's work

ethic and relentless pursuit of perfection. Like Jiro does with sushi, Tatsu hones in on the method and meaning behind the barbecue, relishing in a journey of learning while aiming for excellence.

And oft-quoted expert on shokunin, artist Tasio Orate explains it best: “The Japanese word shokunin is defined by both Japanese and Japanese-English dictionaries as ‘craftsman’ or ‘artisan,’ but such a literal description does not fully express the deeper meaning. The Japanese apprentice is taught that shokunin means not only having technical skills, but also implies an attitude and social consciousness ... The shokunin has a social obligation to work his/her best for the general welfare of the people. This obligation is both spiritual and material, in that no matter what it is, the shokunin’s responsibility is to fulfill the requirement.”

The shokunin spirit is a collective virtue in the end.



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.*



MARKAY MEDIA
©2020 Markay Media. All Rights Reserved.



SMOKED MOLLEJAS ARE ONLY POPULAR IN A TINY ALCOVE OF SOUTH TEXAS



'Mollejas' is the Spanish word for sweetbreads. Yes, y'all. We're talking offal here. In this case, it's usually the thymus glands or pancreas from a cow.

Mollejas are a popular ingredient throughout Mexican cuisine. In Texas — south Texas in particular — you'll find them at taquerias. [To read more about the Mexican influence of south Texas, [read our blog post about its history.](#)]

Our crew hadn't heard of mollejas at a barbecue joint before Texas Monthly barbecue editor Daniel Vaughn gave us the scoop. He was still researching his feature, "[The Smoked Mollejas of Duval and Jim Hogg Counties](#)," and thought he'd throw us a hot tip. But as noted in our most recent conversation, it sounds like he didn't think we'd be crazy enough to fly down to the Mexico-

U.S. border and drive a couple hours into rural Texas to find this elusive treat at [J&S Pit Stop](#). Thankfully for everyone, he was wrong.

Here's what Vaughn had to tell us about the difference between mollejas tacos and smoked mollejas, and the barbecue joints that serve them.

"Mollejas, or beef sweetbreads, are a common menu item at Mexican restaurants in Texas, especially in south Texas. It's just that they're usually braised or simmered, then pan-fried. I'd never seen them at a barbecue joint until I went to J&S Pit Stop in San Diego, Texas. They cook theirs in the smoker, and serve them on a barbecue platter or in a taco. I loved them, and thought I'd stumbled upon a really unique dish. Then I found another smoked version later that day at [Gonzalitoz](#) just south of San Diego, and again a few months later at [Avila's BBQ](#) and [La Estacion Bar-B-Q](#), both in Hebbronville. They were all amazing, but smoked or barbecued mollejas are pretty much unknown outside of that small area in Texas.

You've got to understand that all these places are in the vast region of Texas between San Antonio and the Lower Rio Grande Valley (LRGV). It's an area that most travelers don't linger in. They either drive through it as quickly as possible, or fly over it on their way to Brownsville or McAllen. That's why I didn't think the producers of the show would bother making the trip. The suggestion I made was really a challenge, and y'all responded admirably."

– Daniel Vaughn



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.*



MARKAY MEDIA
©2020 Markay Media. All Rights Reserved.

SOMEWHERE SOUTH

with CHEF VIVIAN HOWARD

BARBECUE EPISODE READING LIST



With the help of our scholarly advisors, we dug into books and articles to research each of our episode themes. Below is a list of some of the most helpful books and essays we found that shaped our understanding and informed our discussion of barbecue culture throughout the American South.

Soul Food: The Surprising Story of an American Cuisine One Plate at a Time by Adrian Miller (University of North Carolina Press, 2013)

As we eagerly await the 2021 publication of Adrian Miller's forthcoming book, "[Black Smoke](#)," which chronicles African American barbecue traditions, we recommend his James Beard Award-winning sophomore book that shines a light on soul food traditions often associated with African Americans. The book features illustrations, maps, recipes, and essays about quintessential soul food dishes, many of which pair well with barbecue.

Southern Food: At Home, on the Road, in History by John Edgerton (Chapel Hill Books, 1993)

In his seminal Southern collection, John Edgerton explores Southern food from the perspective of dining out and taking out. The book reads very much like the sharing of memories at the dinner or diner table. His section, "On the Barbecue Circuit," speaks specifically to the effort of seeking and finding good barbecue in the South.

Endangered Species: North Carolina Barbecue by Kathleen Purvis (Garden & Gun Magazine, April 2019)

Garden & Gun Magazine constantly visits the subject of barbecue in the South, past and present. In this article, award-winning food journalist Kathleen Purvis addresses the disappearance of barbecue institutions in North Carolina and the centuries of pit mastery that has fled with them.

Famous Florida Cracker Cookin' and Other Favorites: Cookbook and Restaurant Guide to Florida's Best Eateries by B.J. Altshul (Winner Enterprises Reprint Edition, 1988)

This ode to the cuisine that defines cracker culture blurs the line between Southern and cracker cooking with dishes that are often considered integral to the Southern culinary canon. However, recipes like swamp cabbage, gator burgers, and turtle soup affirm its place in the "cracker" kitchen.

Barbecue Nation: The Preservation of a Culinary Art Form by John T. Edge (Saveur Magazine, May 2011)

This article penned by Southern Foodways Alliance director John T. Edge begins like a letter to a first love. It then shifts to interrogate the effects class and race have on which barbecue traditions and pit masters are exalted. In true John T. fashion, the colloquial tone creates vivid images while relaying important details of an unsung Southern history.

The Prophets of Smoked Meat: A Journey Through Texas Barbecue by Daniel Vaughn (Harper Collins/Ecco Books, 2013)

A tome of Texas barbecue by Daniel Vaughn, the nation's only Barbecue Editor (for *Texas Monthly*). This was the first title ever curated by the late and legendary Anthony Bourdain for his Ecco Books line.

Tokyo in Texas: Distinctive Japanese Food Is Thriving in Austin by Brett Anderson (New York Times, April 2018)

Southern journalist Brett Anderson writes about chef Tatsu Aikawa through the lens of barbecue, and how foodways are being shaped in modern Texas.



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.*



MARKAY MEDIA
©2020 Markay Media. All Rights Reserved.



BBQ CHICKEN & FLOUR TORTILLAS



Photo by Andrea Weigl

For a real south Texas staple, try this delicious BBQ chicken to pull and tuck into homemade flour tortillas. This recipe comes from Rachel Saenz, who works with her sister, Sarah Chapa, the owner of [J&S Pit Stop](#) in San Diego, Texas.

INGREDIENTS

1 tablespoon plus 1 teaspoon salt, divided
1 tablespoon paprika
1 tablespoon sugar
1 1/2 teaspoons garlic powder
1 1/2 teaspoons onion powder
1 teaspoon black pepper
4 chicken leg quarters

more ingredients next page >

INGREDIENTS (CONTINUED)

4 cups all-purpose flour
2 teaspoons baking powder
2 tablespoons lard
1 ½ cups hot water

DIRECTIONS

Make the chicken: Prepare charcoal grill for cooking or preheat gas grill.

Combine 1 tablespoon salt, paprika, sugar, garlic and onion powders and black pepper in a small bowl; stir to combine. Sprinkle seasoning mix lightly all over chicken leg quarters and let sit for 20 minutes. (You will have seasoning mix leftover; save for another use.)

Place the chicken leg quarters on the top shelf of your grill making sure there are no high flames. On a charcoal grill, make sure the coals are nice and red. If you're using a gas grill, set the temperature to low. Cook about 20 to 25 minutes until internal temperature reaches 165 degrees. Do not turn the leg quarters.

Make the tortillas: While the chicken is cooking, combine flour, 1 teaspoon salt, baking powder, lard and hot water in a bowl. Mix with your hands until dough comes together enough to knead on a counter. Resist the urge to add flour, knead the dough for about 8 to 10 minutes. Cover with a damp paper towel and let the dough sit for about 10 minutes.

Set a comal or cast-iron skillet on the stove over medium heat. Flour countertop and rolling pin. Pinch off golf ball-size pieces of dough and roll with a rolling pin into circles. Throw tortilla onto the comal or skillet until it has some nice brown spots, about 1 minute on each side. Those brown spots will let you know they are done. Freshly made tortillas are always best with butter on them. Keep warm.

Serve chicken quarters or shredded chicken with warm tortillas and other sides, such as rice, beans, pickles and red onions.

Yield: about 6 to 8 servings



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.*



MARKAY MEDIA
©2020 Markay Media. All Rights Reserved.