



A Good Ol' Delta Time

With an old-fashioned supper club, a trio of foodies is showing off the Delta's best.



by boyce upholt | photography by rory doyle

Had Edward Lee made a mistake? Amid the managed chaos—three sous chefs were rinsing pears and carting platters of raw marinated chicken and dredging thick slices of tomato through flour—Lee was not sure just what he'd dumped in the stockpot. He paused for a moment, holding the unlabeled, now-empty Mason jar. "I hope that was chicken stock," he said.

Lee, the acclaimed proprietor of 610 Magnolia in Louisville, Kentucky, had pulled into Bolivar County just a few hours before. He had come here—a tiny, cramped kitchen in the back of the service station at historic Dockery Plantation—to whip up a one-night-only, nine-course, locally sourced meal. "It's going to be a wild night," he said when he arrived.



"I want you to look at the person next to you and say, 'Pass the fried chicken, please.' We as a culture have gotten away from that."

- David Crews



ABOVE: Hugh Balthorp, founder of Clarksdale's Sweet Magnolia Ice Cream, accepts an ovation for his gelato while his wife, Erica, smiles and cheers. Many purveyors were on hand to share the stories behind the food. OPPOSITE: David Crews, Kimme Hargrove, and Stewart Robinson, the masterminds behind the Delta Supper Club, chose Dockery Plantation as the site for their inaugural event thanks to its significant place in Delta mythology: Even B.B. King has declared the plantation the birthplace of the blues. The old service station was decked out for the occasion, including artful table settings with fresh produce trucked in from around the region. Crews, pictured bottom right, was especially excited about the okra.

There was another jar, somewhere, of bourbon-peach glaze—certainly not the desired ingredient for these collard greens. David Crews, a noted local chef and one of the masterminds who convinced Lee to come, took a whiff of the empty jar. He nodded. "Chicken stock," he said, relieved.

The crew settled back into a happy, if manic, routine. Before long, someone cracked a typical kitchen joke—which means it was a sort no one wants me to repeat.

Welcome to the Delta Supper Club.

Sure, this party is serious: its founders will rattle off a list of cultural and charitable intentions. But it's also the Delta, which means it's got to be a little bit loose.

"The Delta is laid-back, almost laissez faire," Crews says. "It'll get done—but we always do it at our own pace. It's more about having a good time."

Stewart Robinson, dreamed up this dinner while leading duck hunts on Lake Washington (Robinson is a guide and chef with Glen Allan-based Esperanza Outdoors). Out-of-state clients, Robinson found, enjoy the Delta and its stories as much as they do the hunt. So a series of gourmet suppers could be a great way to show the world what the Delta's has to offer.

He sought out Crews and Kimme Hargrove, an account

executive for Greenwood-based marketing firm Hammons & Associates, to launch what the trio calls "a members-only social culinary circle." For \$100 yearly dues, members have the chance to buy tickets to up to four of the group's semi-monthly events.

Each dinner, designed and prepared by a new high-profile chef, is served in a historic Delta property. (Next up, on February 5: a meal at the New Roxy in Clarksdale, masterminded by Louisiana chef Cory Bahr). Between full-scale dinners, the club will host "pop-up potlucks" and cocktail hours.

Crews compares it to the old social clubs that thrived in the Delta in the 1970s and '80s. "It was about camaraderie, about being together," he says. "I want you to look at the person next to you and say, 'Pass the fried chicken, please.' We as a culture have gotten away from that." For the hosts, planning this event has built that togetherness: mere acquaintances when they launched last year, they now say they feel like family. And this was the family's first test.

As the sun set over Dockery, a suitably ad-hoc fleet of taxis pulled up to the red carpet—an old Oriental rug, unfurled atop the gravel lot—where diners mugged for the camera before nosing on ultra-local hors d'oeuvres: local rice, local



ABOVE: Chef Edward Lee built a menu that combined his key culinary influences—Southern, Korean, and New York City—with classic Delta ingredients. Lee was attentive to style and appearance as well as taste, carefully plating each course. The fried chicken, seasoned with adobo spices and served with a fiery Thai dipping sauce, was a crowd favorite. Brisket, topped with bourbon-peach glaze, was accompanied by spicy greens cooked with kimchi. OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Oysters, topped with a brown butter bourbon, flash-fried catfish with jalapeno-mint tartar sauce, and Sweet Magnolia's buttermilk brown sugar and bourbon gelato, served atop classic Chess Pie, were all cooked using Mississippi foods.

tomatoes, local pork. The hosts noted that as everybody sat, they took out their phones, snapped some photos, they put them away. The phones never reappeared; there was too much conversation and laughter. "To put 66 people in one room and to have everybody come together like this, it's just amazing," Hargrove said. "This vibe is something I've never felt before."

The servers, carting cast-iron skillets, dished out seemingly endless courses family-style: local honey for dipping bread; local oysters; flash-fried catfish, indispensable in the Delta; and, to end it all, gelato handmade in Clarksdale. This sort of farm-to-table dining is rare in the Delta, but Lee's menu made it look easy. And Robinson dreams of expanding the local offerings, from Delta-grown winter kale to Brussels sprouts. He plans to hand out seeds at future suppers that diners can plant in their own gardens, widening just slightly the breadth of veggies grown amid the Delta's big farms.

Near the end of the evening, Robinson whistled through his fingers to call the attention of the crowd. He wanted Crews to announce another recipient of the event's proceeds. In addition to catering and cooking for well-known hunting clubs, Crews leads the culinary program at Mississippi Delta Community College. He has talented students that get job offers in New Orleans or New York City but can't afford to make down

payments on apartments or turn on the lights. He told the diners that Delta Supper Club is developing a scholarship to support chefs who will carry Delta traditions out into the world.

Throughout dinner, Lee appeared for a moment at a time, escaping from the clatter of the kitchen. He introduced himself; he joked with friends old and new. He showed servers his preferred method for consuming brisket: the meat dangled from his fingers as he dipped it straight into a saucepan full of jus.

It was clear that he had found his tribe. Good food, good times—the good Delta life.

"Towns like this excite me," he said to Crews. "People say, 'Let's just do it.'"

Crews, Robinson, and Hargrove had said just that. And at the end of the night—as the last stack of dishes arrived in the kitchen, as the revelers took a final round of selfies and piled into taxis out front—the Supper Club founders glanced around the tiny, empty service-station-turned-dining-room. They were grinning, pride apparent: It had been done. **M**

For more information, visit deltasupperclub.com or call 662.202.5695.

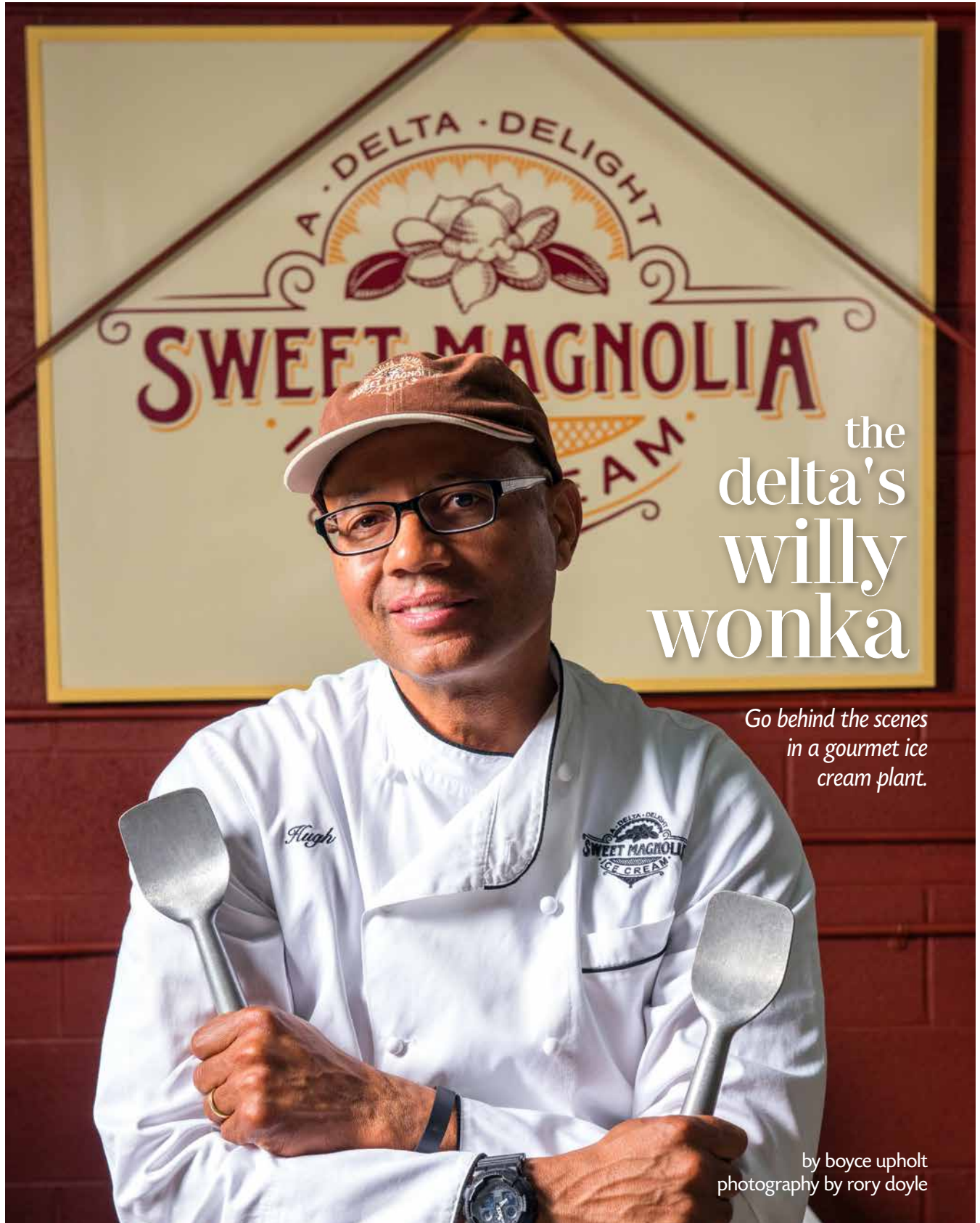


farm fresh delta

Eating local may seem more Brooklyn than back-road Mississippi. But more and more purveyors are providing top-quality goods in and around the Delta. The first Delta Supper Club dinner included a range of high-quality products from local producers and farmers.

- BROWN FAMILY DAIRY, *Oxford*
- DELTA BLUES RICE, *Ruleville*
- HOME PLACE PASTURES, *Como*
- LINDEN PLANTATION HONEY, *Glen Allan*
- SALAD DAYS PRODUCE, *Flora*
- SIMMONS CATFISH, *Yazoo City*
- SWEET MAGNOLIA ICE CREAM, *Clarksdale*





the
delta's
willy
wonka

*Go behind the scenes
in a gourmet ice
cream plant.*

by boyce uphold
photography by rory doyle



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Owner Hugh Balthorp measures an ingredient to make one of his amazing gelato flavors. Balthorp is proud to source local ingredients like Powell & Son's honey from Vance. The gelato machine that he uses was imported from Italy. OPPOSITE, TOP AND BOTTOM: Each pint of ice cream and gelato is hand-packed in the company's Clarksdale warehouse. His delicious frozen treat can be found in grocery stores, restaurants, and ice cream shops throughout the state.



To a driver speeding down Highway 49, the building is less than nondescript; just one more anonymous warehouse along the outskirts of Clarksdale. Train cars sit idle on the tracks along the building's side. In back, a cell tower stretches above farm fields.

But step inside and you'll find yourself in a kind of wonderland: A slight smell of milk and honey hangs just palpable in the air; shelves are stacked with nuts and candies and every ingredient you might imagine in ice cream—which is just what Hugh Balthorp and his crew have been crafting all day.

Donald Sutton collects a fresh batch of Nutella gelato as it pours from the machine that was imported from Italy. He passes the filled pail off to Chris McClenton, who hand-packs the finished product into pints. It's no surprise that both young men love their jobs. "We get free ice cream," McClenton says. "And there's air conditioning. You can't beat that." Balthorp, like a real-life Willy Wonka, wants the place to be fun for his employees. When there's a lull, he encourages the boys to lift weights or jab the punching bag that sits in a corner of the room.

Sweet Magnolia Ice Cream actually specializes in gelato, which is lower in fat than most ice cream, and less airy, and therefore more flavorful. This crew produces hundreds of flavors, from the expected to the obscure. This morning a chef called Balthorp to refill orders of bourbon peanut butter chocolate chip and mango mascarpone gelato.

Sutton notes that trying all the flavors is another perk of

the job, though in a recent taste test he wasn't fond of avocado. "I can't even keep track, man," Balthorp says, when asked for the precise number of flavors.

Six years ago, ice cream was a casual at-home project; just a few batches Balthorp whipped up for his three kids. They were a hit, and soon he began to make ice cream for friends. The response made it clear that he had a business opportunity on his hands, and his wife, Erica, told him he had to find production space outside the house.

Now he's been in his "factory"—a business incubation space he rents from the Clarksdale Chamber of Commerce—for almost five years. These days, Sweet Magnolia can produce 50 pints a day and sells the gelato to 100 restaurants and retail stores across the mid-South—from Georgia to Tennessee—making his craft big business.

Balthorp often sits at a computer in the corner clicking through QuickBooks, but he once ran an art gallery in Washington, D.C. These days he likes to think of ice cream as his canvas. Creating the perfect flavor requires a consideration of balance—milk with cream and sugar and eggs—but also creativity and openness to whimsy.

"I love to stay in that crazy zone," Balthorp says. "It's always a challenge."

Balthorp loves food. The stacks of cookbooks around the warehouse come not only from creameries and dairies but also from award-winning Southern chefs. He keeps pictures on his phone of his visits to the nation's top restaurants and points out how they, like he, emphasize

sourcing local ingredients. His milk, cream, and eggs come from Oxford; his pecans from Indianola; his blueberries from Senatobia.

"It just makes sense," he says. "You support the community where you live. You employ people where you live. Last week I signed five checks. I can sleep good at night."

He drives Mississippi's back-roads to find new ingredients. Today he tears down the highway into Quitman County to visit Harvey Powell, his source for honey. Balthorp spots a box of peaches on the kitchen table. "Where'd y'all get your peaches from?" he asks, and he nods when Powell names the same farmer from whom Sweet Magnolia sources.

Despite this local commitment, Balthorp was not raised in the Delta. He followed Erica, a physician, to town in 2000, when she took a job at the Woman's Clinic. She had spent childhood summers in the Delta, and now Mississippi is home. All three of his children were born in the Delta—his "Delta babies," he calls them.

Hot and swampy, even in springtime, the Delta is the perfect place for ice cream. As Balthorp joins his employees in the day's final tasks—tidying, cleaning the machines—the setting sun bakes the landscape with that famous Mississippi heat. As they open the garage door to back in the delivery van, the humidity rushes in. But then the work is done, and the team sits down to end this day in the only appropriate way: a scoop of peanut butter gelato—fresh, sweet, and cool amid the heat. *M*



Sweet Magnolia Gelato Company
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662.313.6551 | sweetmagnoliagelato.com



Rocking the Cradle

For both fans and young musicians, Grammy Museum Mississippi closes the distance to the stars.

story by boyce upholt | photography by rory doyle



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A young music fan enjoys the sunshine on opening day. Politicians and dignitaries, including Governor Phil Bryant, hold the blue ribbon as it is cut. Members of Jackson-based Southern Comfort Band march through the crowd. Living blues legend Vasti Jackson electrifies an onlooker during his opening-day set. Emily Havens, the executive director of the museum, thanks supporters for their part in making the day a reality.

Los Angeles, with its glitz and paparazzi and year-round sunshine, feels every inch of its 2,000 miles from the Mississippi Delta. But if you want to wind up an L.A. star—or even just get a taste of that glamour—turns out the Delta is not a bad place to start.

“It’s possible to start anywhere, even a small town, and succeed in this industry,” Tricia Walker says. She should know. One of her songs, recorded by Alison Krauss, won a Grammy Award. Now, as the director of the Delta Music Institute at her alma mater, Delta State University, Walker brings an all-star collection of students to L.A. each year to perform at “Mississippi Night.” The event is a part of the weeklong lead-up to the Grammys.

Brennan Barham, a senior at DSU, has sung at the event for three years straight. She’s gotten comfortable there; she considers this year’s performance her best. The crowd knows and loves Mississippi, she says—as soon as they hear the state’s name, they begin to cheer.

With good reason: Grammy officials call Mississippi the “cradle” of American music. We birthed both B.B. King and Elvis Presley, the kings of blues and rock n’ roll. Then there’s Jimmie Rodgers, the father of country music. And Ike Turner, credited with recording the first-ever rock n’ roll song. And Jerry Lee Lewis. Mavis Staples. Britney Spears. The list goes on and on.

Mississippians have won more Grammys per capita than natives of any other state. Which is why this spring, just before the ribbon was cut on one of the most technologically advanced museums in the world, Neil Portnow, the president and CEO of the National Academy of Recordings Arts and Sciences, called Cleveland the “right next place” for a Grammy Museum.

Like its sister museum in Los Angeles, Grammy Museum Mississippi celebrates the entire creative process behind the recording industry, from front-stage headliners to the engineers in the back booth. The Grammys, after all, are sponsored by the National Academy, and honor not just marquee celebrities but composers, songwriters, and producers also.

“We want to showcase Mississippi, but this is about everything,” says Vickie Jackson, external affairs manager at the new museum. The first temporary exhibition, for example, explores the way American music has bounced back and forth across the Atlantic. “Ladies and Gentlemen...The Beatles!” is on display until mid-June. Later that month, it will be replaced by “Pride & Joy: The Texas Blues of Stevie Ray Vaughan.”

On opening day, families wandered the 28,000 square feet, winding through an extensive history of the Grammy Awards. The artifacts reflect the flash of the big event. You’ll see a trumpet played by Miles Davis and gowns in which Beyoncé and Taylor Swift walked the red carpet, not to mention clothing more off-beat—from a feathered headdress worn by New Orleans legend Dr. John to the robot suits donned by French electro outfit Daft Punk.

But this museum is about more than gawking at objects behind glass. Visitors can jam on state-of-the-art instruments or take lessons in historic dance moves from an interactive recording of R&B star Ne-Yo. Step into recording booths to learn songwriting from blues master Keb’ Mo’ or sit down and master the basics of music production.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: On opening day, a student explores a keyboard in the Roland Live exhibit. Upon entering, visitors are greeted by a display of real Grammy Awards. In one of the three self-contained “pods”—a centerpiece of the museum—a student learns techniques of music production.

“Eighty percent of what we’re doing every day is going to be education,” says Emily Havens, the museum’s executive director. “We want to make sure visitors have a worldly perspective on music, the history of music, and what Mississippi has given to the world.”

Pointing to a touch-screen tabletop, across which flows a musical timeline that ripples like the Mississippi River, Jackson notes that only a handful of equivalent exhibits exist in the world. “This thing, from the design perspective, will probably win awards,” she says.

Rita George, the deputy executive director of Grammy Museum at LA Live, says that they had been approached for years about opening a second museum. But the proposal from Cleveland was the first to be truly convincing. The chance to partner with Delta State, where DMI students study the technical and business side of music, was key. It means the museum is more than just a place to visit; it’s also a resource cranking up the volume on a growing local music scene—which might just keep the flow of Mississippi Grammys strong.

“We want to plant our flag here,” George says. “This is how much we believe.”

Since their proposal was accepted five years ago, the Cleveland Music Foundation, the nonprofit that operates the Mississippi museum, raised \$20 million to support this launch. Local officials estimate that as many as 100,000 visitors will come each year, bringing \$20 million into the city.

On opening day this March, while children streamed through the museum doors, dignitaries clustered atop the front porch that was built as an homage to the welcoming tradition of so many Southern homes, and decked out for the weekend with a classic L.A. red carpet. Out on the lawn, a series of musicians, including, of course, Grammy winners and nominees, serenaded the crowd.

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Barham, meanwhile, was working hard. As a part of her senior project, she helped produce tracks for an interactive karaoke exhibit. During the two-day opening festival, she served as a production assistant. Her job: ensure the performers' experience was smooth.

She was well trained by Walker and her DMI professors; as able behind the scenes as up on stage. As she handed over a check to pay the Southern Comfort Brass Band, she took the chance to sell the group, up from Jackson, on this mighty little music town. Stick around, she said to Jamie Abrams, the band's tuba player.

Abrams set down his horn and looked out on the lawn—filled with fans, professionals, and a few L.A. stars. "Oh, we'll be hanging around," he said, smiling. "We'll be right here." M

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the long view

For more than a century, the Mississippi Delta's farming landscape has undergone constant change.

by boyce upholt | photography by rory doyle

to the east of the highway, or maybe to the southeast—I was a little turned around—the horizon looked slightly grey.

“That must be rain over Shelby,” Richard Noe says. He’d gotten a call a few minutes earlier about a downpour crossing the Delta, which he hoped was coming his way. Some of his fields had been drenched by thunderstorms the night before, but they had skirted one outlying patch of land.

To me, though, it just looked like grey. I had driven through Shelby on the way to Noe’s farm, but, turned around by our looping route over the farm roads, now I couldn’t point my way home.

I consider myself knowledgeable about the Delta and its landscape, but Noe, clearly, is on another level.

There is one thing I’m clear on: the Mississippi Delta is a land of farms. Despite its small size (it constitutes one seventh of Mississippi’s land), over three quarters of Mississippi’s row crops are grown here. To some of us—like me—those crops become, at times, just scenery zipping past. For Noe, though, and for the many farmers of the Delta, they are a make-or-break investment.

“If you have a bad crop year now,” he says, “Everything is so expensive. It’s hard to come out of it. It could take five or six years.”

The Delta in its modern form began in the early 19th century, when pioneer farmers, making wild bets of their own, first carved plantations from the swampy woods. Development slowly filled inwards from the riverbanks, as the hardwood forests were cleared away. By 1930, after a century of development, the Delta and its famous soil had become an epicenter of the Southern cotton kingdom.

Nearly a hundred years more have brought changes. Drive the Delta’s highways in late fall, for example, and there is no familiar flash of cotton white.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Farming is big business, and over the years has become increasingly high-tech. Michael Aguzzi parks a tractor after a long day on Aguzzi Farms in Bolivar County. Jerry Evans Jr. checks the GPS display in his combine while working the soybeans on his farm in Bolivar County. Water flows from polypipe into a soybean field in Coahoma County. A tractor levels the furrows in a cotton field on Aguzzi Farms.

In 2006, 1.2 million acres of cotton were planted in Mississippi. Though that's far less than at the crop's peak—over 4 million acres in the early 1930s—it was nevertheless the crop's last big year. In the decade since, cotton has rarely cracked half that acreage. The king crops now? Soybeans and corn.

The story of that change is complex, involving shifting market prices, changing subsidies, and damage from hurricanes. A key factor, though, is that once a farmer abandons cotton it can be pricey to return: a top-of-the-line cotton picker costs as much as \$750,000, and is used for only two weeks, to harvest its one crop. A combine, meanwhile, is useful for corn and soybeans and milo and more.

Other changes have been less apparent: there are emerging high-tech seed varieties, new herbicides and pesticides, and changing methods to water the crops. Noe noted that when he began working with his father 25 years ago, around 20 percent of their land was irrigated. Today it's 90 percent.

"We were done with fieldwork in July," he says. "All we could do at that point was to pray for rain."

When I joined Noe this mid-July he was still in the thick of work, crisscrossing his farmland—scattered in parcels, some rented, some owned, across Coahoma and Quitman counties—and punching holes in the plastic hosing that irrigates his crops.

At one point, Noe and his son eyeballed a field, one they

were farming for the first time. They were trying to decide just how big to punch those holes—five-eighths of an inch? Five-sixteenths? It all comes down to knowing the land, from the slope of the dirt to the length of the rows.

On other fields, software makes these decisions, crunching GPS data with water flow rates to recommend the perfect size. Farming has gone high-tech. Combines beam lasers down turnrows, ensuring they are planted perfectly straight. Furrow irrigation, the most common technique in the Delta, sends water down ditches between rows of crops. That works best when the land has a nice, even slope; even a tiny rise might block the flow.

Which again revealed how little I knew: I always think of the Delta as utterly flat. A few days later, though, Mark Looney and his son John Mark unfurled a soil survey map in their farm office in Washington County. Its topographic squiggles cataloged a vast array of alluvial dirt on their farm, and their curving shapes betrayed the riverine history of the land. They're subtle, sure, but this Delta is pocked with plenty of ridges and bumps.

To aid irrigation, farmers have flattened these corrugations. As recently as 2009, the Looneys bought a piece of property that had never been leveled. Out the dirt movers came; soon enough it was a modern Delta flattened field.

Looney guesses he hasn't had cotton on his land in 25

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The move to soybeans and the rise of technology means more and more land has become cultivated. Michael Aguzzi checks a monitor in one of his fields. On his smartphone, Aguzzi can read data on the soil, from temperature to saturation levels. The Evans family in Bolivar County have, like many local farmers, moved primarily to soybeans. At Stovall Farms near Clarksdale, a rare patch of land stands unplanted. Larry and Jerry Evans sift through some of their dried soybeans.



ABOVE: Thanks to the commitment of families like the McKees, Coahoma County is still the state's top producer of cotton. From left to right: Clay Redd, Bryan Davis, John McKee, Meg McKee, and Will Mullaney.

years. He remembers, though, how in nearby Leland, there were once four or five cotton gins. Just outside of town, at the agricultural research center in Stoneville, an empty slab indicates one former site; a few years ago, the old gin was sold and shipped whole to Georgia. Now only one gin remains in the county.

When it comes to cotton, the research center is still taking the long view. In 2004, on the 100th anniversary of the center's founding, Dr. M. Wayne Eberhar launched the Centennial Rotation, a study that will reveal the long-term effect of planting different sequences of crops in the same plot. Eberhar wants to know which sequence, in particular, will provide the biggest yield.

"It's a planned hundred-year rotation," Eberhar says. "But I don't plan to be here in the final year."

Stoneville—which, at over 4,700 acres, constitutes one of the largest agricultural research facilities in the world—has ragged, weed-cluttered plots that sometimes surprise visiting farmers. But this is how farming pushes ahead: at times scientists want to cultivate worst-case scenarios, creating better canvases on which to test new techniques.

One key question now being tackled at Stoneville: how do farmers beat pigweed? For more than a decade this stubborn weed has been resistant to the most commonly used herbicide.

Mark Looney plans to switch soon to a new chemical, once a new variety of seeds comes in. But in another decade, he figures, pigweed will be resistant to that herbicide, too.

"Farming changes a lot, and it's always changing," he says. "You face different problems every year."

In nearly every field I passed, I saw workers hacking at pigweed with hoes—a return to a once antiquated technique. But other technologies have been left long behind: on the wall of Looney's office, a collection of old mule shoes and railroad spikes were nailed in place—reminders of lives, mostly forgotten now, that had elapsed tending this land. As he drove me home, John Mark showed me the near-perfect arrowheads he'd collected from a nearby Indian mound, remnants of a culture even older, gone long before the land was leveled, before cotton ever appeared.

I tried to imagine what they'd think of our new Delta. Then I found myself thinking ahead: what will it look like in another century's time?

I don't plan to be here, either—but I'm guessing, in one form or another, the farmers will still be around. M



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: "God blessed us with it," Jerry Evans says of his family's land, which was patched together from pieces unwanted by other farmers. Despite the size of the Delta's farms, their daily operations remain in most cases a family affair. Meg McKee examines her family's cotton crop near Friar's Point. A pivot irrigates a field in Coahoma County.



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make it funky

A dark back alley in Gulfport has become the heart of a whole new scene.

by boyce upholt | photography by rory doyle & alex north



It's

There's new life in downtown Gulfport: a New Orleans-style jazz club. An artisanal Popsicle shop, with flavors from across the world. A bistro whose Mediterranean cuisine is dashed with Southern flair—and whose success has launched a local restaurant empire, including the 27th Avenue Burger Bar. There, among other novel burger-toppers, one finds deep-fried mac and cheese and foie gras torchon.

And there, over burgers one Friday night this fall, David Parker clarifies the concept behind the latest addition to Gulfport's downtown scene: a community art project. Parker, Gulfport's community development director, explained how the city made an open call to local artists, an invitation intentionally open-ended, allowing the artists to—not unlike the burger menu—explore their most uncommon whims.

"There's just one rule," Parker says. "They've got to make it funky."

He begins to bob his head, as if to the kind of funk proffered by the late James Brown—whose band was famous for snapping into place on the downbeat, whose music would turn your stride into a strut.

There is another kind of funk, of course—and it's the kind of funk that for years wafted from the alley behind this burger joint.

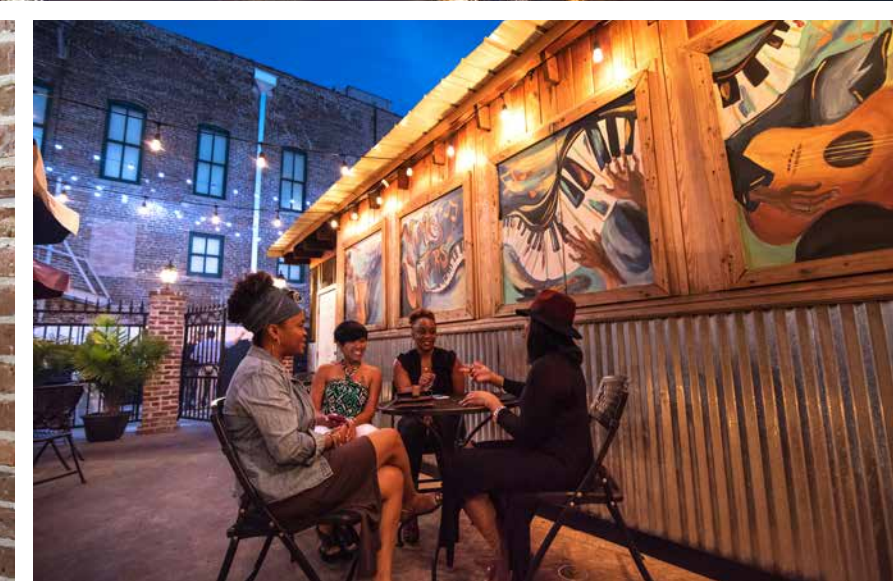
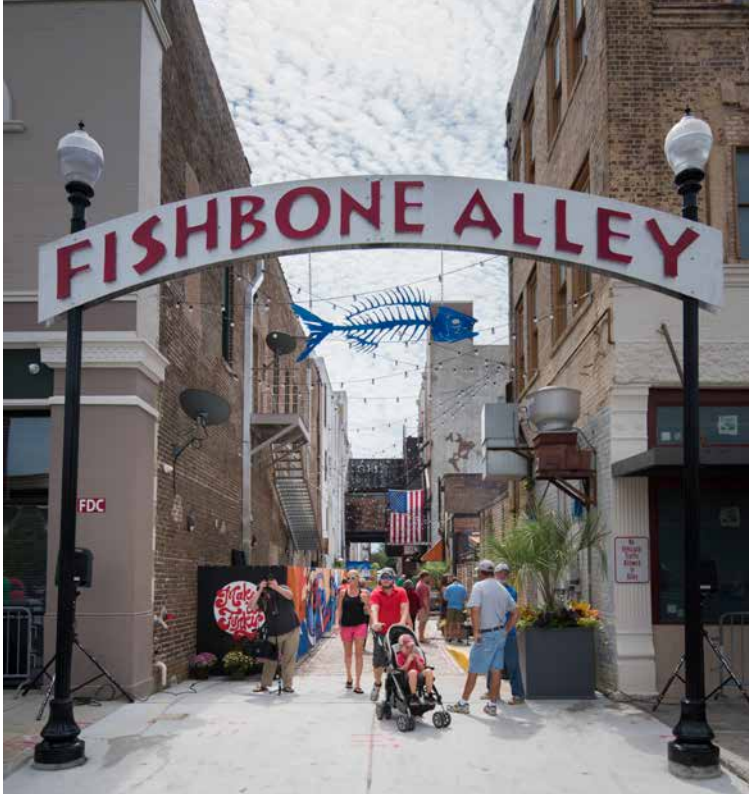
Parker's colleague Chris Vignes called the alley "a total grease trap." (As the city's public information officer, Vignes has a way with words.) The city administration identified the alley as a common site of illegal dumping.

After hearing complaints about trash in the alley, Parker decided to take a walk. Between meetings late one afternoon two years ago, he ducked down the alley and emerged with an unusual idea: he could convert one kind of funk into another.

Vignes, as he explains the concept, mentions his habit of pulling up "trending locations" on the social media app Instagram when he travels. There's a famous pink wall that pops up in Los Angeles and the silver "bean" statue in Chicago. "I want this alley to be that for Gulfport," Vignes says.

Vignes and Parker recount how they convinced their boss, Mayor Billy Hewes, of the merits of the project: they walked down the alley, trying to paint a picture of the scene. "And once you've seen it, you can't not see it," Vignes says.

So picture the old Fishbone Alley, with its unappealing blend of funk: a block long and 20 feet wide, the alley borders the historic buildings on 26th and 27th avenues, which house seven restaurants, three with outdoor courtyards. A place with promise—but back then just a place to keep the trash.



TOP AND BOTTOM: The great weather on opening day brought out a crowd. The food at Corks & Cleavers deserves its rave reviews.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A musician plays in the open-air courtyard at Corks & Cleaver, one of the big new successes in town. Pop Brothers, a gourmet popsicle shop, shows off Gulfport's new flair. The city's eponymous port has long been the anchor. Diners enjoy the evening at Murky Waters BBQ. Even the smallest details, like meter boxes, are receiving the artistic touch.



LEFT TO RIGHT: From shopping to dining—to simply strolling—Fishbone Alley appeals to all. Even businesses off the alley, like Pop Brothers, are finding ways to be involved. A sunrise view from the harbor makes it clear why Gulfport is taking off.

Now picture what Fishbone Alley has become: its surface has been repaved with 100-year-old bricks excavated from the city's first paved streets; its dark passages are lit by goose-neck lamps and stringed globes; its entrance is hung with a hand-crafted, brushed-metal sign bearing the Fishbone Alley name and logo. And it's not over yet: local artists have only just begun the process of painting its shutters and walls with bright colors—and surprising designs.

Take the first major art piece: it's a 60-foot-long mural of an octopus painted along a dumpster corral. Ryan Merrill, a local artist, selected an octopus precisely because it is not often seen around Gulfport—and, in tongue-in-cheek defiance of the alley name, it is not a fish, and has no bones. In fact, he calls the beast "No Bones."

The old funk has not vanished. There are still overhead pipes and back entrances and meter boxes—but these have become the canvas for new art.

"See this stairwell here," Vignes says, pointing to a fire escape. "That's a stage now."

A New Orleans-based developer is building 12 luxury apartments in one of the alley's vacant buildings. Corks & Cleavers, the Mediterranean bistro, now offers prepared food at the new "Fishbone Alley Market;" chef David Dickensauge

and his family have a new Italian bistro on the block.

While the project's flair is modern, it is rooted in ancient ideas. The word "alley" comes from an old French word for "walking," and in older cities, that's just how alleys were used. Elfreth's Alley, in Philadelphia, is the country's oldest residential street.

Parker's initial vision was inspired by two famous Southern alleys: Printer's Alley in Nashville, which began as a connector between the city's early publishing shops and has been lined with nightclubs since the 1940s, and Pirate's Alley in New Orleans's French Quarter, which has accrued many legends—some factual, most not—over the city's three centuries.

Now alley projects are a hip idea. Cities across the country, from Los Angeles to Cincinnati, are turning once-derelict alleys into art projects and event spaces. Oxford residents are familiar with the reclamation of an alley near the Square, where in good weather the innovative restaurant Canteen serves lunch.

It's not an idea that flies in every city. In Gulfport, though, the good kind of funk isn't hard to find.

"Without a doubt we're a coastal town," says Hewes, who was elected mayor in 2013. "We sum it up with an unofficial motto: 'We're open for business and geared for a good time.'"

Hewes holds a weekly Ultimate Frisbee game with local Coast Guardsmen ("I know not to schedule anything on Thursday morning," Vignes says), and his administration has prioritized redevelopment. The "Mississippi Aquarium" will open in early 2019; a community garden will soon greet travelers arriving at the city's international airport.

Shannon Arzola, one of the town's new business leaders, drops by Fishbone Alley on the night of my visit to share her wares with alley pedestrians. Alongside her husband and brother, Arzola produces small-batch exotic Popsicles under the name Pop Brothers. Deservedly, they have won attention in the region and beyond.

"There's been an influx of artisanal food makers returning home to Gulfport," Arzola says. "We're trying to bring new life to downtown—you can have dinner, linger here, then come get a Popsicle for dessert. This alley is the hub of that."

It's been a long process: the grand opening of the alley in early October, was held 10 months after ground breaking, and the project cost \$400,000 (nearly all came from leftover federal grant funds). Over the next few months, artists will continue to install new works, one or two each month. "We want people to come see what's next," Vignes says.

Which, after my first taste, is what I want to see, too.

I end my night at the 13th Street Jazz Bistro, a new venue that sits at the alley's southern end. A band from New Orleans is on stage—they joke that they had to show their passports to cross state lines—and they are stomping out a set list that captured the Crescent City, old and new.

Deep into the set—as if he has absorbed the spirit of the alley—the front man recounts David Parker's single rule: "Make it funky," he chants in rhythm, while the band lays down a thick groove, the perfect beat for a nighttime alley strut.

Then, mid-song, the singer stops. He says that the band is about to count it off, then take things to another plane. "If you can believe it, we can get even funkier." After seeing what's happening in Gulfport, I believe. **M**