

Forward to Craig Claiborne's *Southern Cooking* by Georgeanna Milam and John T. Edge:

During a 1957 job interview, Turner Catledge, managing editor of the *New York Times*, asked Craig Claiborne where he had attended college. "Mississippi State," Claiborne replied. In hopes of capitalizing upon a provincial bond, Claiborne, a fellow native of the Magnolia State, amplified his drawl and swallowed his consonants. "Not Mississippi State," Claiborne later recalled, "but Mississippi State."

Claiborne's response wasn't wholly disingenuous. He did attend the college for one year, after which he packed his belongings and fled the Deep South, bound for the University of Missouri in Columbia. During the decades that followed, he remained a Southern expatriate, oftentimes burdened by conflicted notions of his place and his people.

In 1957, however, with his dream job as food editor of *The New York Times* in the balance, Claiborne played the dutiful son of the South. Born in the Mississippi Delta town of Sunflower, reared in nearby Indianola, he played the part well. Three days later, the telephone call came. Claiborne got the job.

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Raymond Craig Claiborne was born in 1920. When the Great Depression hit the Mississippi Delta, his father, a land-holder and banker, lost nearly everything. Out of economic necessity, the family moved from their comfortable home in Sunflower to a succession of lesser dwellings in

Indianola, where Claiborne's mother, known to seemingly all as Miss Kathleen, ran a boardinghouse and assumed responsibility for the family finances.

Claiborne's Mississippi boyhood was atypical. He had no desire to hunt. He hated getting dirty. He yearned for escape. He found refuge in an unsurprising place: the kitchen. "[It] is where I spent my childhood," he once wrote. After graduating from the University of Missouri with a journalism degree in 1942, Claiborne enlisted in the Navy as a communications specialist, later rising to executive officer on a submarine chaser. He came to love the travel afforded by military service, falling hard for couscous in Morocco and nurturing a lifelong fascination with all aspects of Japanese cuisine.

A second stint in the service during the Korean War followed an extended period of self-guided study, during which Claiborne, newly enamored of the kitchen, worked his way through the *Joy of Cooking*. While on a Pacific atoll, pondering his future, Claiborne had an epiphany: "I thought about some way to combine the two things I like most, and the answer came out – to be food editor of the *New York Times* – was so ambitious, I didn't let myself think about it. At that time I only knew a little about a certain sort of Southern cooking and had never written a professional word in my life."

After discharge, Claiborne took the first step toward his goal, enrolling in the Ecole Hoteliere de la Societe Suisse des Hoteliers, near Lausanne, Switzerland, where he earned certificates in classical French cuisine and banquet service. Professional training grounded Claiborne in

industry standards. Throughout his career, his knowledge of the Escoffier served as a point of pride and differentiation.

Returning to America, Claiborne worked a series of public relations jobs, flacking, among other products, Waring Blenders and Fluffo Golden Shortening. In time, he won over the editor of *Gourmet* by writing “Steeped in History,” an article on tea. Although angling for something else, Claiborne was hired to fill the magazine’s only available position: receptionist. A quick ascent followed.

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When Craig Claiborne joined the *Times*, food was oftentimes deemed a frivolous subject, relegated to the so-called women’s pages. He changed that. As the first male to assume food page editorship of a major American daily, his arrival foreshadowed a shift in America’s attitudes about food. It might be a bit of a stretch to say that Claiborne revolutionized food writing, but he was undoubtedly a catalyst.

His approach, situating food in its historical and cultural contexts, acknowledging the personalities and craft behind the dish, enhanced the culinary consciousness of his readers. His byline and his cookbooks -- of which there were more than twenty, including the *New York Times Cookbook* of 1961, the first widely read American cookbook with true international scope -- introduced America to a multitude of new foods and new perspectives on the dinner table.

“[A] quiche –Lorraine or otherwise – had rarely been heard of on this side of the Atlantic,” Claiborne once said, of the days before his national debut.

Along the way, Claiborne minted a new audience for the concerns of cookery. In 1973 Raymond Sokolov, serving the *Times* during one of his predecessor’s absences, observed that, thanks to Claiborne, “Corner hardware stores sell stockpots and men own aprons.”

With his black IBM typewriter in tow, Claiborne traversed the globe, exploring cultures by way of cuisines. In 1970 he flew to India on the trail of tandoori chicken. In 1974, the same year that the South Vietnamese government fell and American troops evacuated, he traveled to Vietnam to distill the essence of *nuoc mam*. He recognized the worth of foodstuffs found on familiar turf, too, reporting on whole hog barbecue in Goldsboro, North Carolina, and crab cakes in Crisfield, Maryland. Claiborne was an aesthete; he was forever enamored of foie gras this and that. Yet, when asked his favorite dish, he was fond of answering, “I like anything made with ground meat – hamburger, meat loaf, chile con care, curried ground lamb.”

Upon returning to his expansive home kitchen, overlooking Gardiners Bay at East Hampton, New York, Claiborne and his friend and collaborator, the French-born chef Pierre Franey, translated travels and tastes into recipes. Sitting at one end of a massive island, flanked by all manner of equipment, from a brick tandoori oven to an industrial-grade salamander, Claiborne, his baby-blue eyes peeking out over half-lens glasses, pecked at his typewriter, recording Franey’s recipes with hawked precision. As they worked, opera reverberated through the house. And a bottle of wine was oftentimes within easy reach.

In addition to editing the food section of the *Times* and writing features, Claiborne served intermittently as the restaurant reviewer. In that role, he was the first major writer to utilize a star system for critiques. In a day when the business of restaurant reviewing was [a cozy enterprise sometimes fraught with graft, Claiborne was a disciplined and contrarian critic who professed to neither curry favors nor mince words. Of the duckling at Charlie Brown's, Claiborne lamented, "The flavor was excellent but the skin would not have been less crisp had it spent a day on a cafeteria steam table."

The effect was democratizing. As Betty Fussell has noted, Claiborne, by measuring quality against price, "put one of the most pretentious spots in town, The Forum or the Twelve Caesars, on equal one-star footing with a Chinatown joint like the Joy Luck Coffee Shop."

Claiborne's writing, during a 29-year tenure with the *Times*, was required reading for anyone intent upon honing their cooking skills or staying abreast of culinary trends. When in his prime, he not only wrote and edited the news; he made news: In 1975 Claiborne and Pierre Franey bid and won a charity auction certificate good for a meal for two anywhere in the world. Nine bottles of wine and thirty-one dishes later, the men pushed back from table at Chez Denis in Paris, having consumed a dinner valued at more than \$4,000. Reaction was swift from readers who, upon reading Claiborne's front page dispatch, deemed the meal to be an exercise in wretched excess. The Vatican concurred, reprimanding the duo for extravagance. And still Claiborne's star rose.

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He wrote *Craig Claiborne's Southern Cooking* late in his professional life. From this remove, it reads a bit like a valedictory, an exercise in reconciliation delivered by way of a cookbook. There was much to reconcile. The South of Claiborne's youth had been a place of codified manners and mores. He chafed under that yoke and, in turn, directed much of that anger at his mother, Miss Kathleen, whom he said smothered and emasculated him.

As an adult, Claiborne broke off relations with his mother, a decision that resulted in his tandem estrangement from the South. (When sociologist John Dollard, whom his mother had hosted during one of Dollard's earlier research trips to the region, wrote to Claiborne in 1967, inquiring about lodging, Claiborne responded that he knew no one in Indianola and had not visited in 20 years.)

Although Miss Kathleen remained out of sight, she was never out of mind. Claiborne often referred to her in his writing and brought her up, unbidden, in interviews. Among other recipes, he made her chicken spaghetti recipe famous. "It has remained throughout my many years in the world of food a special favorite," wrote Claiborne, in his unflinching memoir, *A Feast Made for Laughter*.

Food offered Claiborne a way home. Recognized as the nation's foremost cookery arbiter, he was free, at last, to embrace his roots. In the writing of *Southern Cooking*, Claiborne gained passage back to his mother's table. Meanwhile, the South gained an advocate who hailed his

native region as possessing “the vastest and most varied of all traditional regional cooking in this country.”

In that spirit of pluralism, Claiborne gathered high and low, new and old recipes for *Southern Cooking*. The region he evoked was neither simple nor static, but complex and evolving. His South accommodated both cheese straws and chitlins.

Claiborne believed that great talent could be found everywhere -- surely in the professional kitchen, but also in the home. In *Southern Cooking*, he showcased both Bill Neal, the iconic North Carolina chef, and Sybil Arant, the wife of a Mississippi catfish farmer. Claiborne laid laurels at the feet of both cooks and, through their recipes, introduced *Times* readers to the vernacular joys of shrimp and grits and fried catfish with hushpuppies.

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In 1988, two years after Claiborne published *Southern Cooking*, he retired for good from the *New York Times*. In the years that followed, the man whom chef Jacques Pepin once called “the most easygoing, generous, socially active person I have ever encountered,” withdrew from public life.

Upon his death on January 22, 2000, Claiborne asked that his ashes be cast out into the water below his beloved East Hampton home, the place that he once claimed meant “more than a wife or a child.” He left his estate – house, books, papers, mementos – to the Culinary Institute of

America, the institution Claiborne saw as the closest analogue to his alma mater, the Ecole Hoteliere de la Societe Suisse des Hoteliers.

Unlike his contemporaries James Beard and Julia Child, Claiborne does not often get his due. The reasons are likely more personal than professional. Some cite his “black mood,” to use the term Jacques Pepin applied to Claiborne’s humor in the later years. Others reference unsettling sexual revelations from *A Feast Made for Laughter*.

No matter, Claiborne deserves credit for his enduring accomplishments. He catalyzed America’s interest in ethnic food. He codified restaurant reviewing. His identification, encouragement, and promotion of chefs like Paul Prudhomme changed the face of cookery.

More to the point of the book that follows, Claiborne, by way of provenance and words, put fried chicken and sweet potato casserole on a pedestal. He offered readers an inclusive primer on the region’s cookery, one that honored the lives and traditions of black and white, poor and rich.

“There has never been any question in my mind,” wrote fellow Southerner James Villas, a onetime Claiborne cohort. “[It] was Craig Claiborne, not James Beard or Julia Child, who first introduced Americans to the glories of great cooking and fine dining.” Yet Claiborne himself once observed, “I don’t take this cuisine business all that seriously. Food is a matter of pleasure.”

--Georgeanna Milam with John T Edge

