



# MOUTH FOR THE SOUTH





# ONE MAN PLUMPS FOR DRUM HEAD STEW, HEIRLOOM SWEET POTATOES, OYSTERS WITH WHISKEY, AND OTHER TASTES OF THE DELMARVA PENINSULA

BY SUSAN HARDY • PHOTOS BY BERNIE HERMAN

**B**ernie Herman first heard about drum head stew from a man who'd never tasted it. When the man was young, he used to fish off the Atlantic coast of the Delmarva Peninsula. After he had his catch of drum fish for the day, he'd sit by the dock and clean it. "People would come by and ask him if they could have the head and the bones," Herman says. "He'd give it to them, and he'd say, 'What're you going to make with this?' And they'd say, 'Stew.'"

Herman knew the seafood of the Delmarva Peninsula well, but he had never heard of drum head stew. "So I started asking people," he says. "And then I hit three or four people in a row who said, 'Yeah, this is how you make it, this is what we used to do.'" That's how the food culture is on Virginia's Eastern Shore, he says. Unique, flavorful, passed from hand to hand. And many of the recipes and stories there have never traveled outside of the community.

Northampton County, at the southernmost tip of the peninsula, used to be one of the wealthiest agricultural counties in the United States, Herman says. Now it's one of the counties with the longest history of persistent poverty in Virginia. Its economy crashed during the Great Depression and never really recovered, he says.

"There's agriculture, but more and more of it is mechanized," Herman says. "And there's not much else. Years ago a company wanted to build offshore oil drilling platforms here. That never went anywhere. Then the state wanted to build a prison. That didn't work out either. The county has held off things like chicken farming and processing that could pose hazards for the fragile aquifer that sustains the area. There are limited economic opportunities, and almost anything would involve importing people to do jobs instead of giving jobs to people who are already there."

Herman started wondering what could help revive this rural, depressed county. He thought back to his early childhood; he was a very young boy when his family lived on Virginia's Eastern Shore, he says, but he remembers that time vividly. What he remembers most is the food.

"Our neighbor then was a farmer who had oysters," he recalls. "My sister and I would go over and he'd shuck us out each a raw oyster, and then he would produce this thimble and he would put a little bit of whiskey in it. We'd each have our thimble of whiskey and our oyster, and then we'd go home for our nap."



**Top left:** Bushel baskets of crabs stacked dockside, Bayford, Virginia. The crabs are sorted by size and sex, with number one jimmies (large males) fetching top prices for the restaurant trade. **Bottom left:** Business sign, Exmore, Virginia. **Right:** Produce shop near Machipongo, Virginia. Fruit and vegetable stands catering to neighbors and travelers alike appear seasonally along the Eastern Shore roadside.





H. M. Arnold's soft-shell crab shedding tanks, Bayford, Virginia. Arnold begins the search for peelers (crabs getting ready to shed) in spring and monitors the process in tanks filled with continuously flowing seawater. His soft-shells are sought after at New Fulton Fish Market in New York City and at home on the Eastern Shore.

One of the most powerful ways people can connect with a place, Herman says, is by eating it: partaking of a region's unique food culture. The local recipes, the stories behind them. Food, he thinks, is a resource Northampton County has yet to fully tap, and one that could turn the area into a destination for a hybrid of ecotourism and food tourism.

The first step, Herman says, is to see what's out there. Most of Northampton County's food history has never been written down or recorded—for many of the people he interviews, it's the first time they've ever had a conversation with someone about what they grow, or what they cook. He talks to people who are new to the area, and people whose families have been farming Northampton County for hundreds of years. One couple grows an heirloom strain of bloody butcher corn and mills it to make a red-speckled meal. Other families have varieties of figs they've been growing since the 1700s.

Just about everyone Herman meets has a story about food. "One time, I'd been thinking about dumplings," he says. "That day I was at the landfill, and there was this woman there, and I just turned to her and said, 'Do you like puff dumplings or slick dumplings?' And she said, 'Oh, I like slick.' So we sat there in the dump and we had this conversation about the slick dumplings her mother used to make.

"Everybody there remembers food with great affection. And everybody *cooks* something."

Last year, with southern historian Marci Cohen Ferris, Herman organized a group of food writers, editors, and chefs to visit the southern peninsula and explore its cuisine. One of them, *New York Times* food writer Molly O'Neill, picked up clam fritter and duck dumpling recipes to put in her 2010 cookbook, *One Big Table*. Others of the group have written about the Eastern Shore: its wines, its Hayman sweet potatoes, its oysters that absorb the flavors of the creeks where they're grown.

Herman has brought fresh oysters from Northampton County to Chapel Hill merchants. 3CUPS, a wine, tea, and coffee shop, held an Eastern Shore oyster tasting, where Herman introduced customers to oysters that are as distinctive as different wines or coffees—sweeter or saltier, firmer or softer. Lantern, one of *Gourmet Magazine's* top fifty restaurant favorites, now incorporates Eastern Shore oysters and sweet potatoes into its menu.

"Creating awareness and desire for what's here—that's the part of this I'm trying to work on," Herman says.

He doesn't just want to bring food tourism to Northampton County, Herman says; he wants to build a model that could be used in other places to tap into food culture. "I've been thinking about the mountains of North Carolina, and the incredible history of beans there," he says. "Bean collectors, recipes, ways to prepare beans. Beans in the mountains are the equivalent of oysters on the Eastern Shore."





Planting Hayman sweet potato slips, William Baines' farm, Eastville, Virginia. The Hayman is a prized local sweet potato that was introduced to the Eastern Shore in the mid-1800s. Delicate and greenish in hue, the Hayman is very sweet. Sweet potatoes are grown from slips rooted in hot beds and transplanted by hand to open fields.

"Almost anywhere you go, there's that one food that a place has."

It's about more than bringing back the old knowledge of cooking. "You hear all these cries of dismay about the erosion of regional and local identities," Herman says. "But things are always changing, and part of that change is how the individual and the local and the regional assert their identities in new ways."

For example, the merging of the Eastern Shore's best-known heirloom vegetable with a newly arrived Hispanic food: Hayman sweet potato empanadas. <sup>e</sup>

*Bernard Herman is the George B. Tindall Professor of American Studies, and Marci Cohen Ferris is an associate professor of American studies, both in the College of Arts and Sciences. Herman and Ferris wrote essays about Southern food culture that appeared in the winter 2009 issue of Southern Cultures (www.southerncultures.org).*

**Right:** Drum fish sign, Painter, Virginia. Local diners savor red and black varieties of drum, and look forward to the first appearance of the fish in spring. Drum appears on menus in the form of drum sandwiches and drum ribs, both fried. In the not-so-distant past, the large, meaty fish was the signature ingredient in dishes such as baked fish with potatoes and gravy and drum head stew.

"The drum, behind his head and gills, behind in the back there, it's an awful lot of meat. And the backbone, of course, when you sided it off in between the backbone, it's meat. And they would chop that up and boil it, and that gave you your seasoning. It was like marrow out of a cow. Take the bone out, and then they would chop up the meat also, and boil that in there with it. And you had almost like a stew or chowder, and you'd add your potatoes. Just like clam chowder."

—H. M. Arnold, Bayford, Virginia (2008)

