WHAT IS A STORY WORTH?: THE VALUE OF NARRATIVE AT THE CARRBORO FARMERS’ MARKET

Sara Camp Arnold

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of American Studies (Program in Folklore).

Chapel Hill
2012

Approved by:
Marcie Cohen Ferris
Bernard L. Herman
Danille E. Christensen
Abstract

SARA CAMP ARNOLD: What Is a Story Worth?: The Value of Narrative at the Carrboro Farmers’ Market
(Under the direction of Marcie Cohen Ferris)

This thesis examines the exchange of narrative in the buying and selling of farm products at the Carrboro Farmers’ Market. It begins by situating the Carrboro Farmers’ Market in a historical tradition of story-based exchange of agricultural products in the North Carolina Piedmont. Next, it studies five cases of contemporary narratives exchanged among Market vendors, customers, and area chefs. This thesis concludes that a Chapel Hill-Carrboro terroir has been constructed over the past thirty-five years via the buying and selling of value-added narratives attached to locally grown products.
Table of Contents

I. INTRODUCTION.......................................................................................................................1
   Methodology and Road Map.................................................................................................4
   Theoretical Grounding..........................................................................................................6

II. A CENTURY OF SELLING THE FARMER’S STORY.........................................................17
   When girls say “tomato”.........................................................................................................18
   Curb appeal...........................................................................................................................20
   Stories going once, going twice, sold!....................................................................................25
   “Build a fence around it”: Chapel Hill in the 1970s.............................................................26
   The early days of the Carrboro Farmers’ Market...............................................................29

III. “TELL THEM THE REAL STORY”: FIVE CONTEMPORARY
   NARRATIVES OF THE CARRBORO FARMERS’ MARKET.............................................34
   The Hitts and the Barkers: A farm-to-table friendship.......................................................34
   Michael Brinkley and Stanley Hughes: Home-grown heritage..........................................42
   Eliza MacLean and Rufus Brown: The “cure” for the common ham....................................50
   Rob Segovia-Welsh: Food is political!...................................................................................59
   Carla Shuford: “There’s early, and then there’s Carla”.......................................................64

IV. CONCLUSION: IF YOU GROW IT, THEY WILL COME.............................................69

BIBLIOGRAPHY..........................................................................................................................75
Introduction

It is 6:40 a.m. on a springtime Saturday morning in Carrboro, North Carolina. A pale, early morning sky of pink and blue peeks through a patchy layer of clouds. Despite the hour, the Carrboro Town Commons is abuzz with activity. In twenty minutes, the Carrboro Farmers’ Market will open for business. For the four dozen vendors who are setting up shop this morning, it’s almost show time. Pick-up trucks, vans, and station wagons are backed up to tables laden with strawberries, radishes, cut flowers, tomato seedlings, potatoes, eggs, and much more. A bearded gentleman in his sixties, clad in a tie-dyed sweatshirt, carefully unloads pottery—coffee mugs, candlesticks, pitchers—from the back of his Volvo. An African-American woman arranges plastic-wrapped pound cakes on her table, aided by her teenage nephew. Near the wooden archway that marks the entrance to the Commons, a scrap-metal sculptor explains to a basket weaver how he cut and soldered the wings on a dragonfly made from salvaged auto parts. Behind them, a trim young man in a cycling uniform mounts his bicycle on a stationary trainer and sets up a card table with a jar soliciting donations for a charity AIDS ride. Young women in their twenties, Market volunteers, arrange Carrboro Farmers’ Market T-shirts for sale at the information booth and plug in the Market’s portable ATM machine. Tablecloths—from Indian batik to all-American gingham—are smoothed down over folding tables. Heads of lettuce are spritzed with water from plastic spray bottles. Placards announcing the name and price of each item are straightened, adjusted, and finally left in place. “SPINACH—$3 A BAG—NO SPRAYS, NO DUST.” “STRAWBERRIES: GROWN SO CLEAN, WE EAT ’EM IN THE FIELD.” “DUCK EGGS—$8.75 A DOZEN; GOOSE EGGS—$3 EACH.”
By seven o’clock, the first customers are beginning to make their rounds. The market will begin to bustle within the hour, but for now, the farmers take advantage of the light traffic to visit with one another and perhaps do some of their own shopping. “Good morning, Hazeline.” “I finally put my tomatoes in after that last frost the other week.” “Happy Birthday, Carla!”

Every Saturday throughout the year, and on Wednesdays from April to October, a vibrant folk group comes together to create a place through narrative and ritual. These individuals are the vendors and customers of the Carrboro Farmers’ Market. They are retirees and young families with children, professors and students, Research Triangle Park professionals and college-town bohemians. They are white, African-American, Asian, and Latino. They have come for the food, the community, the sense of place, and the stories that the Carrboro Farmers’ Market has offered its participants for over thirty years.

The Carrboro Farmers’ Market has become a cultural jewel in the crown of small-town Carrboro, North Carolina, a former mill community situated just a mile west of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. During the rest of the week, the Carrboro Town Commons is a former baseball field with two wooden shelters covering paved sidewalks where the first and third baselines used to be, a gazebo between the pitcher’s mound and home plate, and a small playground in the outfield. It is occasionally used for other community activities, such as the monthly “Really, Really Free Market,” a free swap meet offering items and services from used clothing to haircuts. But the space truly comes alive on

---

1 The Carrboro Farmers’ Market maintains an excellent website, [www.carrborofarmersmarket.com](http://www.carrborofarmersmarket.com). Of particular use to me, especially in the early stages of my research, were the farmer-vendor profiles compiled by Market volunteers Rob Meeker and Katie Anderson and the Market history researched and written by Kelly Clark, the Market’s special events coordinator.

Saturday mornings and Wednesday afternoons when the Carrboro Farmers’ Market is open for business. As a vital folkloric space during these designated times, the Carrboro Farmers’ Market can be understood as a “temporary recurring community,” a term developed by folklorist Carolyn Lipson-Walker.³

Retired couples linger over cinnamon buns and cups of coffee, greeting favorite vendors and fellow customers by name. Tourists from near and far browse for suitcase-friendly souvenirs—a jar of bourbon-fig preserves, perhaps. A nationally renowned chef munches a charcutier’s made-from-scratch hot dog while picking up crates of produce to serve at his restaurant that evening. Young parents hoist toddlers on their shoulders, teaching them to identify the vegetables, fruits, and flowers. Old friends exchange hugs; farmers discuss the weather and ask each other, “How’d you get your strawberries to come in so early?” In the first hour of the market, some customers are on a focused mission to buy what is on their list before the best heirloom tomatoes and the choicest cuts of grass-fed beef have been snapped up; such hard-won trophies will be the pride of tonight’s dinner party.

This thesis examines narrative in the expressive environment of the Carrboro Farmers’ Market, a multilayered landscape of story, memory, economic exchange, and political engagement. On the surface, the items for sale at the Market include local and seasonal fruits and vegetables, pasture-raised meats and eggs, farmstead cheeses, and artisan baked goods. But narratives, not just food, are bought and sold at the Carrboro Farmers’

³Writing about small gatherings of Jewish southerners, Lipson-Walker described the phenomenon of a “temporary recurring community.” Carolyn Lipson-Walker, “‘Shalom Y’all’: The Folklore and Culture of Southern Jews.” Diss. Indiana University, 1986. p. 98
Market. Tales of public health crusading accompany Bill Dow’s Alma Paprika peppers.4 Betsy Hitt’s anemones and irises recall the months that she and her husband, Alex, spent living in a tent when they first bought Peregrine Farm as twenty-five-year-old aspiring farmers. Sweet potatoes from Stanley Hughes’s Pine Knot Farms evoke three generations of African-American land ownership. Customers could purchase many, if not all, of the same or similar products—sometimes at a lower price—at nearby grocery stores. They come to Carrboro both for the stories behind the food and the sense of place and community that vendors and customers have cultivated together over the past three decades.

**Methodology and Road Map**

This ethnography of narrative in a local food economy draws upon fieldwork conducted in 2011 and 2012, oral histories conducted in 2011, and a social historical study of the agricultural economy of Orange County, North Carolina, and its environs.5 Here, in the introduction, I present the critical and theoretical texts that inform my study, and I propose that the farmers, chefs, and customers who frequent the Carrboro Farmers’ Market have constructed a Chapel Hill-Carrboro terroir over three decades through the exchange of narrative.6

---


5In the summer of 2011, I worked with two colleagues on an oral history project documenting the Carrboro Farmers’ Market for the Southern Foodways Alliance. We conducted a total of twenty oral histories with vendors, customers, and chefs who are part of the Market community. These interviews and accompanying audio slideshows are all available online at: [http://southernfoodways.org/documentary/oh/carrboro-farmers-market/index.shtml](http://southernfoodways.org/documentary/oh/carrboro-farmers-market/index.shtml)

I also conducted fieldwork with Rob Segovia-Welsh of Chicken Bridge Bakery and Abraham Palmer of Box Turtle Bakery for Professor Kathy Roberts’s class, The American House in the Critical Perspective, and with Eliza MacLean of Cane Creek Farm (one of my Southern Foodways Alliance oral history subjects) and Rufus Brown of Johnston County Hams for Professor Charles Thompson’s Politics of Food class.

6My theory of the narrative construction of terroir in the Chapel-Hill Carrboro area from the 1970s to the present was inspired by a conversation I had with Bill Smith, the chef of Crook’s Corner restaurant in Chapel
My journey into the narrative worlds of the Carrboro Farmers’ Market begins in the North Carolina Piedmont in the early twentieth century—a “progressive” era of agricultural and rural reform that produced innovative new markets and organizations to stimulate farm economies and promote education among rural farm families, including women and girls. Chapter One, “A Century of Selling the Farmer’s Story,” examines three historical examples of narrative-based agricultural entrepreneurship in the Piedmont: the girls’ tomato clubs of the 1910s, the women’s home demonstration curb markets of the Depression Era through the mid-twentieth century, and the Durham tobacco auctions of that same period. In these distinct moments, producers deployed narrative to market and add economic value to their goods. This historical journey takes us to Chapel Hill-Carrboro in the 1970s and the social and cultural scene that fostered the founding of a local farmers’ market. Chapter One concludes with the founding narratives exchanged in the early years of the Carrboro Farmers’ Market. This is a fascinating moment that brought together young, countercultural “back-to-the-landers” with local, longtime farmers who turned to produce when conventional tobacco became a losing battle.

Today, the value-added narratives at the Carrboro Farmers’ Market speak of tradition, authenticity, and local scales of engagement. Nutrition and political activism are important themes as well. Chapter Two, “Tell Them the Real Story,” examines five contemporary narratives of the Carrboro Farmers’ Market. In the first narrative, the relationship between Alex and Betsy Hitt of Peregrine Farm and Ben and Karen Barker of Magnolia Grill

---

Hill, on April 2, 2012. Smith said, “Our [terroir] is not based on a very long history, which is interesting. Some places, like Louisiana, have a long history of food. This is not. This is all sort of planted here forty years ago at the longest. But nonetheless, it’s been cultivated well here…. The tradition is new. But it is one all the same.”
demonstrates how “artistic communication in small groups” fosters innovation—and, in turn, economic success—at both a farmers’ market and a white-tablecloth restaurant. In the second narrative, Michael Brinkley of Brinkley Farms and Stanley Hughes of Pine Knot Farms leverage agricultural heritage and historical memory to market their produce. The third narrative examines the experience of Eliza MacLean, who raises livestock at Cane Creek Farm and “packages” authenticity and tradition in the form of Ossabaw prosciutto with the help of Rufus Brown, the second-generation “curemaster” of Johnston County Hams. The fourth contemporary narrative is that of craftsman Rob Segovia Welsh, who performs his identity as a political activist via stenciled slogans, dusted in flour on loaves of bread baked in his cob oven. Finally, a fifth narrative focuses on Carla Shuford—a faithful market customer for over thirty years—who attributes her physical and emotional well-being to relationships with farmers at the Carrboro Farmers’ Market, whom she calls “my family and my medical team.”

In my conclusion, I return to the market to reflect briefly on its growth and success over the last thirty-three years and its central role in the development of a Chapel Hill-Carrboro terroir during that period.

Theoretical grounding

I begin with a question: What is the value of a good story? Specifically, I ask this question of the produce, meat, and artisan foods for sale at the Carrboro Farmers’ Market. In the simplest terms, a farmers’ market is a retail space where vendors come together to sell produce and homegrown or homemade goods directly to consumers at retail prices. However,

---


8Carla Shuford, Oral History conducted by Sara Camp Arnold for the Southern Foodways Alliance, August 24, 2011
as a folklorist with a deep, personal interest in narrative, I have chosen to focus on the stories exchanged at the Carrboro Farmers’ Market. Thus, for the purposes of this thesis, a Farmers’ Market is a location of economic exchange where a vendor leverages narrative to sell his or her products to individual consumers. Without exception, the stories that farmers and artisans tell about their products—and their lifestyles—allude to the power, and indeed the economic value, of narrative in the life of the Carrboro Farmers’ Market. In fact, one can argue that the products for sale at a farmers’ market represent narrative.9 As April McGreger of Farmer’s Daughter Brand Pickles and Preserves says, “I’m not selling fig preserves; I’m selling the story of fig preserves.”10 McGreger’s statement demonstrates the commodification of narrative that occurs at the Market. Stories are both ingredient and currency, adding value to goods from collard greens to tomato starts to pound cakes. When a customer buys a head of lettuce at the Carrboro Farmers’ Market, she is not only paying for the lettuce, but also for the story of how it was grown and by whom. On the other side of the transaction, the farmer deliberately markets that lettuce with an accompanying narrative, from its provenance and method of cultivation to the way it is displayed on the table at Market.

Indeed, the exchange of narrative is written into the Carrboro Farmers’ Market’s rules and regulations. One of the most important regulations of the Carrboro Farmers’ Market is that the farmer/producer or a member of his or her immediate family must be at the market to sell the goods.11 Farm employees or interns may be present to help, but they are not allowed to staff the booth in lieu of the actual business owner. As we will see later, the presence of

9Bernard Herman, in conversation, April 2, 2012.
10April McGreger, oral history conducted by Kate Medley for the Southern Foodways Alliance, May 15, 2011.
the producer at Market—specifically, his or her availability to engage in conversation with the customer—is an important condition for the exchange of narrative.

This analysis of narrative at the Carrboro Farmers’ Market is grounded in theories of folkloric context, historical memory, place in everyday life, material culture, and the construction of terroir. My work contributes to the vibrant, growing discipline of food studies, a multidisciplinary field that incorporates elements of folklore, anthropology, American studies, history, sociology, and more. Food studies scholar Marcie Cohen Ferris offers a powerful answer to the rhetorical question, “Why study [southern] food?” when she explains,

“Food is entangled in forces that have shaped southern history and culture for more than four centuries. The cultural processes associated with food—production, regulation, representation, identity, and consumption—have taken on aliases such as agriculture, animal science, civil rights, consumption, decorative arts, domesticity, drink, economy, exchange, garden, horticulture, hunger, malnutrition, marketplace, nutrition, obesity, pottery, poverty, property, reform, segregation, slavery, starvation, sustenance, terroir, trade, and wealth. When we study food in the South, we unveil a web of social relations defined by race, class, ethnicity, gender, and shifting economic forces.”

This thesis examines the “web of social relations” that vendors and customers weave at the Carrboro Farmers’ Market with the narratives they exchange.

***

Beginning in the early 1970s, led by Dan Ben-Amos and Richard Bauman, folklorists began to analyze narrative, performance, and material culture in the context in which they occurred. Argued Ben-Amos, “In its cultural context, folklore is not an aggregate of things, but a process—a communicative process, to be exact.” Bauman expanded upon Ben-

---


Amos’s proposal by delineating a “web” of contextual situations, both cultural and social, in which folklore occurs.\textsuperscript{14} It is important to interpret the exchange of narratives going on at the Carrboro Farmers’ Market in the contexts in which they take place. First, the Market is a place of economic exchange. Many of the customers and vendors have formed friendly and even close relationships, but they gather there, above all, to buy and sell food. Second, the Market is located in a small town adjacent to a major university. The customer base is thoroughly and formally educated—and so are many of the vendors. This is a folk group that puts a premium on knowing where its food comes from and how it was raised. In addition to being educated, the customers are largely middle or upper-middle class. They value the story of the free-range chickens that laid the $6-a-dozen eggs, and they are willing and financially able to pay for it.\textsuperscript{15}

Furthermore, the political leanings of the Market community are overwhelmingly left of the middle. Here, a baker can display a loaf of bread stenciled with an “Occupy” slogan, and the message is not only tolerated but cheered. Given its political leanings, the Carrboro Farmers’ Market is still a southern market. Despite President Obama’s razor-thin victory here in the 2008 presidential election, North Carolina is a traditionally conservative state, particularly in rural areas that surround the cosmopolitan Research Triangle. The handful of conventional farmers at Market, representing North Carolina’s traditional agricultural economy, are supported and respected. A middle-aged African-American woman who grew up in the rural community of White Cross sells old-fashioned pound cakes next to a thirty-
five-year-old white Mississippian offering Korean-style kim chi and Indian-inspired chutneys. Greetings are polite and accompanied by eye contact and a smile. Transactions begin with “please” and end with “thank you.” Elders are respected, even revered.

***

The Carrboro Farmers’ Market is an important site of southern historical memory. As Chapter One discusses, today’s Carrboro Farmers’ Market recalls important moments in the region’s agricultural past. “Memory,” writes historian Fitzhugh Brundage, “is inextricably bound up with group identity.” When vendors and customers gather at the Market, they are collectively affirming their connection to a way of life that has shaped the American South for over three centuries. In addition to buying and selling food at a farmers’ market, eating is an act that connects us to history every day. Part of what customers take home with them when they shop at the Carrboro Farmers’ Market is a tangible, ingestible connection to a people and a place with deep roots in the Piedmont soil.

***

People make space into place through narrative and practice—the stories they tell and the everyday actions they perform. At the Carrboro Farmers’ Market, space is transformed into place via two levels of enlivened practices. The first level is the individual object that is sold—a loaf of bread, for example. The bread is a place—a locus—that becomes a deeply evocative space when infused with a narrative. On the second level, all of these loci and their accompanying narratives are assembled for a few hours each week, turning the physical space of the Carrboro Town Commons into a place, the Carrboro Farmers’ Market. Early-

---


twentieth-century tomato clubs, curb markets, and tobacco auctions set a historical precedent for this two-tiered, narrative-driven practice of space in the North Carolina Piedmont. The five narratives of contemporary vendors and customers identified above speak to those two levels of spatiality at today’s Carrboro Farmers’ Market. The first level is the value-added narrative that infuses each commodity. The second is how these narratives come together to form a larger and more complex narrative of the Market as a whole.\textsuperscript{18} Narratives are both the tactics through which vendors control space at the Market, \textit{and} the tools customers use to move through that space, creating and performing a consumption-based identity.\textsuperscript{19}

Consumption takes on an important role in everyday life because it is a means of self-expression and identity formation. People craft stories about themselves through the goods they buy, and project these narratives onto their communities.

Vendors create a narrative-driven image for their business. Customers choose the brands they want to buy and how much they are willing to pay to become a part of those narratives.

Beyond purchasing groceries, many customers are also buying “souvenirs” of their market adventure. A jar of Mark Overbay’s Big Spoon peanut butter says, “I was there at the Market, and I brought this piece of it home with me.” So does a Cane Creek Farm pork roast served to a group of food-conscious academics at a dinner party. In that situation, the consumer has purchased a measure of social capital along with her meat, which she then bestows upon her guests. In groups such as this one, a pork roast on sale from Harris-

\textsuperscript{18}Bernard Herman, in conversation, April 2, 2012.

\textsuperscript{19}De Certeau, Ch. III.
Teeter—most likely slaughtered and processed by Smithfield—would have the opposite, undesired effect.

Furthermore, the narratives that are exchanged at the Carrboro Farmers’ Market are recursive, which implies an element of invention or evolution. They are not repetitive, because they are not static. We can compare the narrative recursion that occurs at the Carrboro Farmers’ Market to the shifting value of a currency. These narratives, which function as a form of Market currency, are subject to devaluation and revaluation. The more a narrative circulates, the more value it loses. The vendor must then repackaging or remarketing the same product—the narrative facts—in a different way so as to introduce an element of novelty and thereby increase its value once again. Vendors assemble and revise their marketing narratives via a sort of bricolage. Sam Suchoff, the chef-owner of The Pig restaurant in Chapel Hill, operates The Pig hotdog cart at the Carrboro Farmers’ Market. Suchoff makes his hotdogs from scratch using pastured pork from North Carolina farmers. Shortly after he began coming to Market on Wednesday and Saturdays, he introduced the option for customers to “upgrade” to a freshly baked Chicken Bridge Bakery bun (instead of a conventional, packaged bun) for an additional dollar. Suchoff used what was available around him—Rob Segovia-Welsh’s Mexican-inspired bolillos (rolls), whose shape resembles

---


21 Bernard Herman, in conversation, April 2, 2012.


23 De Certeau xiii–xiv

24 The Pig’s website, http://www.thepigrestaurant.com/ announces that it is “Working with the NC Natural Hog Grower’s Association & their antibiotic- & hormone-free pasture-raised piggies to bring regional flavors and local ingredients to the party in your tummy.”
a hotdog bun—to add an extra layer of value to his narrative. Through interactions and observations with individual customers, restaurant chefs, and fellow farmers and artisans, Carrboro Farmers’ Market vendors learn how to successfully assemble and reassemble stories about locality, artisanship, tradition, authenticity, and nutrition.

Folklorist Gerald Pocius’s theory of artifactual gossip can help us interpret the goods for sale at the Carrboro Farmers’ Market. Pocius explains that “gossip, whether verbal or artifactual, has to do with two major concerns: information management and the fostering of self-interest.” He identifies three key elements of gossip: it must present new information, it must compete with other versions of the same story for the listener’s attention, and it must connect seemingly unconnected events. By marketing their products with a value-added narrative, the vendors at the Carrboro Farmers Market’ are managing information and fostering their self-interest as business owners. Whereas gossip spins new tales to maintain listeners’ attention, new goods are constantly available at the Carrboro Farmers’ Market. A farmer keeps a captive audience by trying new crops—a novel variety of hot pepper or heirloom tomato, for example—while a producer of artisan preserves introduces flavor combinations on a regular basis. When blueberry preserves ceases to be novel, blueberry-lemon verbena has the potential to recapture the customer’s attention—and his dollars. Attention from local, regional, and national print and web media—from National Public Radio to the upscale southern lifestyle magazine Garden & Gun—is also a form of gossip about the Market. So is Sarah Blacklin’s weekly newsletter to the Market’s customer listserv, which announces what produce is currently in season and spotlights a few vendors each

26Pocius 1988: 328
week. These forms of published gossip attract first-time customers to the Market and renew the interest of those who have fallen by the wayside.

Pocius identifies a system of “local aesthetics,” whereby community members are able to identify a successful craftsman by a set of commonly accepted criteria.27 The Carrboro Farmers’ Market, too, exhibits a system of local aesthetics. Though each vendor cultivates his or her own “brand,” some are more popular than others. Put broadly, these tend to be the farmers and artisans who combine product innovation with a carefully constructed aesthetic of locality and/or authenticity. For example, April McGregor’s Fire-Roasted Poblano Jam is a take on the traditional southern favorite, pepper jelly (usually eaten with cream cheese and crackers during cocktail hour). McGregor uses a variety of locally grown hot peppers traditionally cultivated in Mexico. Pocius explains, “with new ideas [comes] new status,” as McGregor has seen in her sales for this popular product.28 Vendors experience the same phenomenon at the Carrboro Farmers’ Market: former tobacco farmer Michael Brinkley enjoyed increased customer attention and more robust sales when he expanded his field pea offerings from black-eyed peas to include purple hulls, zipper peas, and English creams.29 The narratives in circulation at the Market are globally influenced, as well. In 2010, Alex and Betsy Hitt of Peregrine Farms attended Terra Madre, the biennial conference of Slow Food International in Turin, Italy.30 They returned to North Carolina with ideas for new crops to grow and fresh stories to share with their market customers. The practice of artifactual gossip, which Pocius describes as “link[ing] elements in new ways,” is not only in


28Pocius 1988: 337

29Michael Brinkley, oral history conducted by Kate Medley for the Southern Foodways Alliance, July 19, 2011.

30http://www.slowfood.com/international/28/national-and-international-events-calendar
play at the Carrboro Farmers’ Market, but it is indicative of a broader trend in southern
foodways.\textsuperscript{31} Today, restaurant menus from Atlanta to Louisville offer creative dishes using
traditional southern ingredients, such as butterbean hummus and collard green kim chi—the
latter is a delicious accompaniment to pork belly. If local food is gossip, Chapel Hill-
Carrboro is a hub of chatter, full of new and juicy tidbits.

***

_Terroir_ is a French term that translates imperfectly into English as “the taste of
place.”\textsuperscript{32} Though it is normally associated with the taste of wines, food products can also
have _terroir_. Broadening the basic idea of _terroir_ as the essence of the soil infused in food or
drink, folklorist Bernard Herman offers a definition of _terroir_ rooted in memory and
storytelling:

“_Terroir_ is about culture and conversation revealed through food—and about how the
cultural resonance of food is revealed through language. Narratives surround ingredients,
preparations, and events. These are powerful memories that, shared through anecdote and
recollection…enable us to consume vicariously the flavors and pleasures of place.”\textsuperscript{33}

At the Carrboro Farmers’ Market, _terroir_ is constructed through narrative. The
Chapel Hill-Carrboro _terroir_ that consumers discern in 2012 can be directly attributed to the
vital process of narrative exchange that has taken place at the Carrboro Farmers’ Market
since 1979. The distinctive circumstances that facilitated this construction of _terroir_ in
Orange, Chatham, and their adjacent counties for the past forty years are both geographic and
cultural. A university town with educated, affluent consumers is surrounded by land that has

\begin{itemize}
  \item Pocius 1988: 323
\end{itemize}
a long agricultural history. Yet, as many farmers confirm, the soil in this area was never
spectacular. It was sandy in some places; red clay in others—and what topsoil that existed
when European settlers arrived was depleted by centuries of tobacco and cotton monoculture.
Much of the grazing land was trampled, eaten, and packed down by livestock.

Despite this history, the local farmers who sell at the Carrboro Farmers’ Market have
managed to renew the soil’s fertility through a combination of sustainable farming practices,
agrarian idealism, and sheer determination. The taste and the nutritional value of their
produce have improved, perhaps in ways that are scientifically measurable. But terroir exists
at the intersection of nature and culture, and these farmers could not build the vibrant food
culture that exists today in Chapel Hill-Carrboro without creating a story that linked their
own efforts to the region’s agricultural history. And they could not do this alone. Local
chefs interpret the farmers’ efforts on the plates at their restaurants, drawing national
acclaim. Customers respond enthusiastically by patronizing both the Market and the local
farm-to-table restaurants. Together, this community has successfully built a Chapel Hill-
Carrboro terroir in less than forty years.

34Trubek 2008: 6
Chapter 1
A Century of Selling the Farmer’s Story

Though the current incarnation of the Carrboro Farmers’ Market was founded in 1979, its roots lie in the history of creative, narrative-based agricultural entrepreneurship in the North Carolina Piedmont established in the first decades of the twentieth century. This chapter begins by discussing three moments in the era of rural and agricultural reform that predated the Carrboro Farmers’ Market. These are the girls’ tomato club movement, local home demonstration curb markets, and the exchange of food that occurred in the vicinity of Durham’s tobacco auctions. These moments provide snapshots of North Carolina farmers and their families as they leveraged narrative to sell homegrown products from the 1910s to the 1950s. From this period, we turn to the social, economic, and political climate in and around Chapel Hill in the 1970s, the era in which the Carrboro Farmers’ Market was born. It is impossible to fully parse the narratives that are exchanged at today’s Carrboro Farmers’ Market without understanding their historical antecedents. Adding value to a farm product by attaching a story to it is nothing new. Not only has narrative influenced economic value at the Market since its inception; it has also been vital to the buying and selling of farm products in this area for at least a century. Farmers’ markets existed in the American South as early as the colonial period. To best understand the historical foundation that lies beneath the Carrboro Farmers’ Market, our journey begins exactly one century ago with an unlikely group of savvy marketers and producers: the girls’ tomato club movement of the progressive New South.

When girls say “tomato”

The first girls’ tomato clubs were organized by Marie Samuella Cromer of South Carolina in 1910, and the movement lasted barely a decade. It is worth noting for two reasons. First, it made white and black farm girls into southern entrepreneurs. As foodways scholar Elizabeth Engelhardt explains, the organizers of girls’ tomato clubs “had faith that capitalism and consumerism could work for girls from rural backgrounds.” The clubs were an important antecedent to the women’s entrepreneurship that characterized home demonstration curb markets in the following decades. Second, “the tomato club movement walked a fine line between an agricultural past and an industrial present.” Girls leveraged family land and agricultural know-how to raise tomatoes, while their canning procedures represented cutting-edge technology. This attention to new cooking methods responded to the early-twentieth-century consumer’s desire for food that was “hygienic” and “sanitary,” two buzzwords for the preferred “modern” food of the era. While their mothers and grandmothers put up fruits and vegetables in glass Mason jars, these young women used steel cans and modern canning equipment.

Marie Samuella Cromer touted the local provenance of her club girls’ tomatoes. Most commercial canned goods in southern supermarkets were produced in Baltimore or other distant cities. Cromer argued the girls’ tomato clubs kept money in the state of South Carolina. The same philosophy held true in North Carolina under tomato club organizer Jane McKimmon of Raleigh. Leaders such as Cromer and McKimmon, and the teenage girls they


37Engelhardt 2011: 84

38Engelhardt 2011: 85

39Engelhardt 2011: 94
worked with, realized that they best could sell their product by promoting pride of place and community kinship. While a canning factory in Baltimore was distant and abstract to a consumer in North Carolina, the canned tomatoes from the girls’ tomato clubs were literally rooted in local soil. These young women producers were their children, neighbors, students, friends, and fellow congregation members. Especially in smaller towns, customers understood that purchasing a girl’s tomatoes helped send her to high school, or that buying from another offset her father’s disappointing tobacco yield. Families who bought the girls’ tomatoes were not only paying for a story; they became part of the story. The girls’ tomato clubs fostered a reciprocal, participatory foodways narrative.

McKimmon was acutely aware of the girls’ potential to wield narrative as a marketing tool and fostered this skill in the budding entrepreneurs she oversaw. North Carolina club girls were required to create scrapbooks of their experiences for each season they participated in the clubs. By asking the girls to document their club experience in words and pictures, McKimmon was pushing the young producers to articulate and take ownership of their individual narratives. This practice, and the increased self-awareness it afforded, made them more savvy marketers the following season.

A narrative can render visible that which was previously invisible. As Engelhardt discusses, an important achievement of the girls’ tomato clubs was the increased the visibility of the members. In the rural South of the 1910s, there were few opportunities for a farm girl to carve out a public place in the community. Growing, canning, and marketing their own tomatoes created public personae for these young women based on their own talents and

---

40 Engelhardt 2011: 102
41 Engelhardt 2011: 89
42 Engelhardt 2011: 106
achievements, not those of their fathers, mothers, and brothers. Selling the story of their own hard work gave the tomato club girls a sense of pride. The young women called upon the practical skills and emotional strength from their club experiences as they later negotiated the demands of work, marriage, and motherhood.

**Curb appeal**

In 1914, the United States Congress passed the Smith-Lever Act, which created the Cooperative Extension Service of the USDA. The goal of the service was to foster rural reform by educating farm families. A large part of this education was tied up in teaching small farmers how to use modern technologies to improve their yields. But particularly interesting were the reform programs aimed at farm women and administered by home demonstration agencies in rural counties. As historian Lu Ann Jones explains, rural reformers identified women as “the linchpins in the creation of a rural New South of prosperous farms, clean and comfortable homes, healthy children, and vibrant communities.” In the 1910s–1930s and beyond, curb markets sponsored by home demonstration agents brought rural women into the middle class and modern consumer culture.

Curb markets sprang up across North Carolina, in cities and towns including Hendersonville, Greensboro, Chapel Hill, and New Bern. By the time the Extension Service was created, most North Carolina farmers concentrated their efforts on nonfood cash crops—particularly tobacco, but also cotton, as well grain for fodder. However, it was still common practice for a farm family to keep a garden for its own food needs, along with perhaps a dairy

---


44 Jones 2002: 15
cow, some chickens for eggs and poultry, and a hog to slaughter after the first frost. Female home demonstration agents recognized that “the country home represented ‘a producing as well as consuming center.’” If farm women could be brought together to sell extra goods that they produced at home, they also could be subtly—or not so subtly—encouraged to purchase products that they otherwise would have manufactured themselves or gone without. They moved into the modern, middle-class consumer economy of the New South. A few dozen eggs sold at a weekly curb market might eventually net a farm wife enough pocket money to buy a new Easter hat or a pair of new high-heel pumps to wear to church. In a particularly bad year, especially during the Depression, the stakes might be even higher. The extra income that women earned at curb markets could tip the balance in keeping a family out of devastating debt.

Eggs, milk, butter, and dressed chickens were among the most popular and profitable items at the curb markets. A variety of fruits and vegetables were available as well. Home demonstration agents taught the farm wives to maximize their earnings by adding value to their products; for example, neatly molded butter fetched a better price than plain milk. Similarly, women in town were willing to pay extra for a chicken that had already been dressed rather than carrying out the unpleasant task at home themselves.

As with the girls’ tomato clubs, the women’s home demonstration curb markets also cashed in on the value of narrative. In fact, fostering social interaction between rural women and middle-class town women was one of the explicit goals of the curb markets. Engelhardt points out that “[Jane] McKimmon was clear…that from its beginning the curb market

---

45 Jones 2002: 20
46 Jones 2002: 14; 52
47 McCleary 2006: 115
movement was in deliberate opposition to mere capitalist market efficiency.”\(^48\) She believed that the social aspects of the curb markets—bringing farm women together with each other and with middle-class women in town, where they exchanged ideas and friendships—were just as important as their economic benefits to rural women. McKimmon claimed, “friendly chats while sales are being made that give both buyer and seller a clearer understanding of each other’s worth.”\(^49\) Of course, McKimmon understood these “friendly chats” also greased the wheels of commerce and improved the markets’ bottom line.

The women who organized and participated in the home demonstration curb markets also constructed a narrative via display, in terms of the physical space of the market as well as the appearance of the vendors. Though curb markets usually began outdoors in a municipal space, as their name suggests, many enjoyed enough success to move to permanent, indoor locations. Whether indoors or outdoors, the home demonstration agents taught their club members how to become savvy marketers. They took pride in displaying their wares. The produce, eggs, and other goods were packaged to be more appealing than what was available at the local grocery or general store. The displays had “country” touches—a gingham tablecloth—but they also emphasized cleanliness and purity. Some vendors decorated their stalls with cut flowers, while others arranged produce in attractive wicker or cane baskets.\(^50\) The emphasis on a respectable appearance extended to the women vendors. Many demonstration agents required the curb-market sellers to dress in uniform.\(^51\) Starched white dresses were common, suggesting purity and cleanliness, which extended to

\(^{48}\) Engelhardt 2011: 184

\(^{49}\) Engelhardt 2011: 184–185

\(^{50}\) McCleary 2006: 117

\(^{51}\) Jones 2002: 66
the food being sold. Like the vendors at today’s Carrboro Farmers’ Market, the clubwomen literally stood behind the products they sold. Their names and faces were central to a person “brand” that assured quality. Because their affiliation with the products was public and transparent, their reputation was at stake with each transaction. Other “modern promotional tactics” employed at curb markets throughout the South included raffles, newspaper ads, and endorsements from community leaders.52

Home demonstration organizations—and curb markets—were racially segregated until at least the 1950s. A 1952 local history published to mark the bicentennial of Orange County, North Carolina, praises the home demonstration agents, both white and “Negro,” for fostering reform and progress among the county’s agricultural sector:

“Much of the credit for the improvement in farm homes which has taken place and the higher standard of living which has come to prevail should go to the Home Demonstration Agents. Orange County has had a home agent for white farm women since 1935 and another for Negro women since 1941. While they welcome visits from individuals, their principal method of instruction is through neighborhood groups organized as home demonstration clubs. In 1952 there were 16 white clubs and several Negro clubs…. The clubs teach by demonstration how to can fruits and vegetables, preserve meats, make rugs, upholster furniture, decorate rooms, make garments, trim hats, and many other things that reduce the labor or add to the comfort of farm women. At the same time, they provide another valuable social contact.”53

Chapel Hill had its own home demonstration curb market—most likely for white vendors and customers—from the late 1930s into the 1950s.

“About 25 women in the southern part of the county have found a way to supplement the family income through their curb market in Chapel Hill. The market was promoted by the home demonstration agent and has now been in operation about fifteen years. In the year which ended September 20, 1952 the produce sold at the market brought $27,651. Of this, $7,419 was derived from the sale of poultry, $12,665 from eggs, $6,816 from vegetables,

52Jones 2002: 67
$1,227 from butter, $1,493 from cakes, and the rest from meat, bread, fruit, and miscellaneous products.”

The presence of cakes for sale suggests another interesting detail about the role of narrative in the economic success of local curb markets. The clubwomen who sold their wares at the curb markets shared in a collective identity, but these markets also opened up a space for individual recognition. A vendor who became known for her cakes, pies, or other specialty goods became a “local celebrit[y],” as historian Ann McCleary points out in her study of the 1930s curb market in Staunton, Virginia. As with the tomato club girls, this sort of recognition brought attention to farm wives and conveyed a vital sense of self-esteem.

The Chapel Hill curb market ended several years before the birth of the Carrboro Farmers’ Market. Some farmers’ markets in North Carolina, including Greensboro, are still known locally as “curb markets.” Engelhardt argues that that curb markets retained the “curb” part of their names on purpose, even when they grew beyond literal curb markets, for reasons of authenticity: “It signaled the roots of the practice, as well as reminded customers, competitors, and producers of the differences in the markets from permanent businesses.”

In maintaining the curb market name, the Greensboro market claims a direct connection to the past. Though the Carrboro Farmers’ Market did not retain “curb” in its name, it carries on the mission of the earlier curb markets in some important ways. The Carrboro Farmers’ Market continues to provide an alternative space for the buying and selling of agricultural products—and the stories attached to them. It brings farmers together with each other and with “town” (urban/suburban) consumers, resulting in the vital exchange of narrative.

54 Wager 1953: 258
55 McCleary 2006: 99
56 Engelhardt 2011: 183
Stories going once, going twice, sold!

Though bright leaf tobacco has lost its luster in the past few decades, it was once the linchpin of North Carolina’s agricultural economy. In the fall of 1939, a pair of young documentarians—FSA photographer Marion Post Wolcott and Leonard Rapport of the Federal Writers’ Project—recorded the sights and stories of the Durham tobacco auctions.57 Their work recalls a link between the exchange of narratives and marketing tactics surrounding the Durham tobacco warehouses and the contemporary exchange of narratives at the Carrboro Farmers’ Market.

As historian Pete Daniel has argued, “The wave of cultivation, curing, and marketing skills that swept through the Carolinas and Georgia [beginning in the late 19th century] was part of a significant reconfiguration in southern rural life.”58 The public tobacco auctions in Durham brought rural farmers together in a competitive, commercial environment. They were there first and foremost to sell their year’s tobacco harvest, but the space in and around the warehouses represented a bustling nexus of modern consumer culture and small-scale entrepreneurship. Farmers from rural Orange, Granville, and Person counties might make the trip to Durham only once a year. They found creative ways to maximize their profits while they were there.

Photographs by Marion Post Wolcott show farmers at the Durham and Mebane auctions buying and selling hogs, turkeys, and produce outside the warehouses.59 Narrative and story was at the heart of these transactions—comparing yields, discussing the weather,

Rapport also covered the 1938 tobacco auctions for the Federal Writers Project. That year, FSA photographer Dorothea Lange was working in the area as well.
58 Daniel 2009: 663
59 These photographs are digitized and available to the public online at the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.
sharing family news, speculating about the war brewing in Europe, and plans to do better next year. Some farmers even went door-to-door with goods that they and their wives had produced back home on the farm. A series of Marion Post Wolcott photos shows Mr. Elvin Wilkins going door-to-door in Durham, selling butter that his wife made on their Granville County farm. Dressed in a suit, tie, and hat, Mr. Wilkins projects an image of middle-class respectability that granted him access to homes where he peddled his wife’s butter between auctions.

Successful manipulation of aesthetics and narrative was essential inside the auction warehouses as well. Leonard Rapport writes about one farm widow who told her story of hardship to the tobacco buyers at the Durham auction while they inspected her harvest. Though her narrative may well have been true, she exhibited modern marketing savvy by attempting to move the buyers’ sympathy in her favor. Before the tobacco left a family’s farm, the women and children smoothed the leaves and tied them into “hands,” making them look as pretty as possible to fetch the highest price at market. These methods foreshadow today’s attractive displays of produce and prepared goods at the Carrboro Farmers’ Market. Though CFM farmers do not auction their wares off to the highest bidder, they similarly draw customers by filling their stands with attractive displays.

“Build a fence around it”: Chapel Hill in the 1970s

In the 1970s, the state of North Carolina made plans for a new state zoo in Asheboro. The late Jesse Helms, then serving his first term in the United States Senate, famously and

---


61 Rapport 1938

62 Daniel 2009: 669
sarcastically remarked that the state “just put up a fence around Chapel Hill.” Indeed, owing in large part to the presence of the University, Chapel Hill has long held a reputation as the state’s liberal haven. Says Bill Smith, the longtime chef of Crook’s Corner, “in those days, this was the only place in North Carolina that you could come and be weird.”

Smith has lived in Chapel Hill since 1967. In the early 1970s, he was also one of the founders of Cat’s Cradle, one of the area’s beloved and most important alternative music venues. At the same time, Smith’s circle of friends included many “back-to-the-landers”—young activists who turned to farming for both income and political beliefs—including Ken Dawson of Maple Spring Gardens and Cathy Jones of Perry-winkle Farm. These same activists were early vendors at the Carrboro Farmers’ Market. In fact, Dawson and Jones remain Market fixtures today, more than thirty years later. Explains Smith, “There was a big romance about back-to-the-land in those days. Huge thing…. Everybody was not going to go to college, they [wanted] to buy farms and feed themselves…. The Vietnam War and Civil Rights were all going on…people didn’t want to be part of [that]. We were trying to not take part in the establishment culture if it was possible.”

Food studies scholar Warren Belasco notes similar motivations among the counterculture and food ecology movements in Berkeley, California: “In the Johnson-Nixon years (late 1960s–early 1970s), the rediscovery of organic foods and holistic healing accompanied the ecology movement, which was itself a

---

63 If pressed, surely Helms would have recommended that the fence enclose Carrboro as well.

64 Bill Smith, Personal Interview, April 2, 2012

65 Bill Smith, personal interview, April 2, 2012
reaction against the wholesale destruction of nature and tradition both here and in Southeast Asia.”

In those days, Bill Smith recalls impassioned conversations about books as Euell Gibbons’s *Stalking the Wild Asparagus*, Frances Moore Lappé’s *Diet for a Small Planet*, and volumes on healthy eating by the nutritionist Adelle Davis. Some of his friends cooked from the *Alice B. Toklas Cook Book*—“maybe because she said to cook with hashish.” Wendell Berry’s essays on agrarianism were likely influential as well; his seminal *The Unsettling of America* was first published by the Sierra Club in 1977. Perhaps Ken Dawson was reading Berry when he founded Maple Spring Gardens in 1981; today, the Maple Spring Gardens website features a Berry quote on the home page. “How we eat determines to a considerable extent how the world is used…land that is in human use must be lovingly used; it requires intimate knowledge, attention and care,” the quote reads. This passage is taken from Berry’s 1989 essay “The Pleasures of Eating,” the same work in which Berry famously declared, “eating is an agricultural act.” Though this particular essay postdates the founding of both Maple Spring Gardens and the Carrboro Farmers’ Market, it is representative of the agrarian philosophy Berry espoused in *The Unsettling of America*.

Chapel Hill’s location made the back-to-the-land dreams of farmers like Dawson possible. Though the Research Triangle Park was already taking shape between Chapel Hill, Durham, and Raleigh, swaths of agricultural land remained in the rural parts of Orange, Chatham, Durham, and Alamance counties. These were the early days of

---


67 Bill Smith, personal interview, April 2, 2012

industrial agriculture when Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz declared, “Get big or get out.” Many multigenerational Piedmont farm families chose the second option. Bill Smith explains that these conditions facilitated unlikely alliances between young, back-to-the-landers, and those who might be called “always-on-the-landers.” Smith says, “The people that had all the land, particularly down in Chatham County, people wanted to rent it from them…. They could rent the old houses and the extra back acre to people who wanted to farm…. People like us thought it was very romantic to go to an outhouse. [Laughs] There was actually a sort of friendly alliance, as much as any sort of friction.”69 If these young “hippies” wanted to return to the land, the old-timers were happy to let them have a go at it.

Ken Dawson and his wife Libby purchased land in Cedar Grove, North Carolina, and began to farm in while still in their twenties. Recalls Dawson, “The first year that we sold at the Market that was the year that my wife Libby and I got married. We had entered a joint venture together that spring. I was going to grow vegetables and she was going to sell them. I was a shy young man, who didn’t like to go to town much. I did not like to interact with people very much. I wanted to be barefoot and work in my garden.”70 Thirty years later, Maple Spring Gardens is a fixture at the Carrboro Farmers’ Market. Ken sells the produce, often with an intern who helps to manage the busy stand. His shyness disappears as he chats amiably with customers and fellow farmers on Saturday mornings.

**The early days of the Carrboro Farmers’ Market**

The Carrboro Farmers’ Market was not founded to combat the rural poverty that agricultural extension agents worked to alleviate during the Depression, nor did it seek to

---

69Bill Smith, personal interview, April 2, 2012

70Ken Dawson, Oral History conducted by Kate Medley for the Southern Foodways Alliance, June 19, 2011
make middle-class consumers out of farm women, one of the “reform”-minded goals of the women’s home demonstration curb markets from the 1930s to the 1950s. Yet the Carrboro Farmers’ Market was founded with similar ideologies centered in community engagement and economic activity.

The biggest difference between the previous Chapel Hill curb market and the Carrboro Farmers’ Market was that the corporation was farmer-owned from its inception. Whereas agricultural extension and home demonstration agents such as Jane McKimmon had tried to teach middle-class consumer values and entrepreneurial skills to the farm families they worked with, the CFM founders were making a political statement by explicitly rejecting the industrial-capitalist food system and offering an alternative space for the exchange of food as well as conversation.

Bill Dow is a Carrboro Farmers’ Market founder and the owner of Ayrshire Farm in Chatham County. Dow moved to North Carolina in the mid-1970s and was teaching a class at the University of North Carolina’s School of Public Health in Chapel Hill. A trained pediatrician, Dow believed farmers’ markets were the most effective means of promoting public health. Farmers’ markets provided locally grown produce, as well as economic opportunity for rural families by encouraging them to turn traditional farming skills into extra income. Before he put down roots in Chatham County, Dow started farmers’ markets in Nashville and in the Appalachian coal-mining region of east Tennessee, where he completed his medical residency.71

As a fellow at the School of Public Health, Dow and his colleagues and students helped get the market on its feet in Carrboro. Before the Carrboro Farmers’ Market was

71Bill Dow, Personal Interview, April 2, 2012. See also Bill Dow, Oral History conducted by Ashley Young for the Southern Foodways Alliance, August 29, 2011
officially founded, area farmers set up on Saturdays at the Church of the Reconciliation off of East Franklin Street and then in the parking lot at East Gate shopping center. In 1979, the Market moved to a large parking lot off of Roberson Street in Carrboro, next to the rescue squad. A wooden shelter was built to shade the farmers and their customers on hot summer mornings and to keep them dry when it rained.

Bill Dow remembers the founding vendors as a powerful “cross-section” of individuals. He recalled early members such as Henry and Laura Sparrow, who have since passed away. Henry Sparrow had worked in a cafeteria, and the couple turned to farming as a second career when they were in their fifties. According to Dow, the Sparrows and others of their generation were initially skeptical of the Market’s potential. “They didn’t think it was going to make them any money, but it did, and it was a lot less work than what they were doing, for a better price.” They quickly came to see the benefits of selling their produce for retail instead of wholesale, and they likely enjoyed the face-to-face interactions with customers as well. Dow recalls that Sparrow and William Friday, then president of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, particularly enjoyed each other’s company. The Sparrows and a handful of their peers set their stands next to young growers like Jack and Wilma Hanton of Hillsborough, who joined the Market in its first season and whose young sons napped in baby carriers or played among the booths. Now in her sixties and single, Wilma Hanton still brings flowers and potted plants to the Market under the name “Wilma’s

---

72 Bill Dow, personal interview, April 2, 2012
73 Kelly Clark, telephone conversation, 21, 2012
74 Bill Dow, personal interview, April 2, 2012
Garden.” In the seasons that followed, other present-day market stalwarts such as Ken Dawson and Alex and Betsy Hitt joined the first farmer-vendors.

Magnolia Grill chef Ben Barker has clear memories of the early market, including the generational mix of “back-to-the-landers” and “old-timers.” “When I first started going to the Carrboro Market as a cook at La Residence in the summer of 1981, it was a seasonal market. It was in the old covered parking lot one block behind Main Street, and there were about ten vendors there…. One of them was Jane Filer—she’s a well-considered artist now—she was frying donut holes off the back of a pickup truck…. There were about eight growers: Bill Dow, who has been one of the daddies in here; Ken Dawson shortly thereafter; Howard and Louise Pope, who really were tobacco farmers and also truck farmers that sold all the produce that I knew from growing up.”

In the summer of 1982, the Carrboro market vendors hired a lawyer and drafted by-laws, rules, and regulations. The Carrboro Farmers’ Market was formally incorporated as a business in 1983. From the beginning, the vendors identified the exchange of narrative as an explicit goal:

“The Chapel Hill-Carrboro Farmers’ Market, Inc. is being founded to promote direct marketing of farm products from the original producer to the consumer. The goal of the corporation is to operate farmers’ markets in the Chapel Hill-Carrboro area which serve the dual purpose of providing (1) a direct retail outlet for local farmers thereby promoting local agriculture, and (2) an alternative buying arrangement for consumers where high quality fresh products are available at reasonable prices in an atmosphere conducive to the exchange of information and ideas between the original producer and the consumer.”

75Wilma Hanton, Oral History conducted by Kate Medley for the Southern Foodways Alliance, July 3, 2011
76Ben Barker, oral history conducted by Kate Medley for the Southern Foodways Alliance, July 10, 2011
77E-mail correspondence, Sarah Blacklin, and e-mail correspondence, Alex Hitt, March 28, 2012
78“By-laws of the Chapel Hill-Carrboro Farmers’ Market, Inc.”
The farmer-vendors were also sowing the seeds of locavorism and staking their claim to a taste of place. Thirty years later, vendors and customers continue to gather at the market for the exchange of high-quality food and identity-shaping narratives. They achieved the goal of “promoting local agriculture.” The farmer-vendors created a Chapel-Hill Carrboro terroir, a brand recognized today for its excellent reputation in the worlds of regional and national foodways.
Chapter 2
“Tell them the real story”: Five contemporary narratives of the Carrboro Farmers’ Market

The Hitts and the Barkers: A farm-to-table friendship

Alex and Betsy Hitt, both fifty-five years old, have owned and operated Peregrine Farm in the rural Eli Whitney community of Alamance County, North Carolina, since 1981. Ben Barker, fifty-eight, and his wife, Karen, fifty-four, have been cooking together since the late 1970s, and they opened their own restaurant—Magnolia Grill in Durham, North Carolina—in 1986. The thirty-year friendship between the Hitts and the Barkers embodies Dan Ben-Amos’s definition of folklore as “artistic communication in small groups.”

Folklore is a communicative process, and communication depends on interpersonal relationships—narrative exchange—between the members of a group. The two couples cite their relationship—which encompasses friendship as well as professional interaction—as integral to their professional success. It is a relationship built on the co-creation and exchange of food narratives. If asked their formulas for success, the Hitts and the Barkers would certainly respond, “Hone your story; own your story.” Together and independently, both couples have spent the past three decades carefully crafting a narrative that lies at the heart of their identities as farmers and chefs.

The key to the success and longevity of both Peregrine Farm and Magnolia Grill is in large part due to the extraordinary talent of Alex and Betsy Hitt and Ben and Karen Barker. But more significantly from a folklore perspective, these entrepreneurs consciously created a

79 In a 2011 oral history with Kate Medley of the Southern Foodways Alliance, Alex Hitt explained, “The folks who do best at Market are the ones who have real genuine interest in whatever it is [that they sell]…. Because the customers know, and they’re going to come and buy from those folks that they think are the ones telling them the real story about that product.”

80 Ben-Amos 1971: 13
powerful narrative that has great meaning for them and for their customers. They honed their brand with a determined vision, yet this vision is not static. The Hitts and the Barkers are professionals with passion for their work. Generations of customers—as well as fellow farmers and chefs—respect and support them for what they have created.

Both the Hitts and the Barkers knew from relatively young ages that they wanted to own their own businesses and be their own bosses. They took different paths, but both couples worked hard to achieve their treasured independence. Explains Karen Barker,

“In the early ’80s at the [Carrboro Farmers’] Market, a couple of new young growers… [saw] the Farmers’ Market as an opportunity to make a lifestyle choice: to own some land, and to not work for someone else; to direct their own lives. Both of those professions—farming and cooking—are very labor and time intensive. And so we found fairly early on that we shared…a work ethic, the understanding of how hard you work would translate into the end-result and became very good friends and cultivated marvelous enduring relationships with the people that grew stuff for us. Alex and Betsy Hitt of Peregrine Farm are now lifelong friends.”

In choosing to “direct their own lives,” the Barkers and the Hitts also wrote their own narratives as chefs and farmers—and in turn, as savvy marketers of local cuisine and farm produce.

***

Alex Hitt, whose mother and father were both from the South—Tennessee and Arkansas—was born in Columbia, Missouri. He describes his father as an avid amateur gardener and his mother as a talented home cook. Though the family moved frequently when Alex was growing up, including to New England for some time, his family took their southern identity with them by way of soil and plate. His father raised squash, greens, and tomatoes in a backyard garden, which his mother would turn into “all the classic southern dishes.” Betsy House Hitt was raised outside of Newark, New Jersey; she fondly remembers

81 Barker oral history, July 10, 2011
gardening with her Scottish maternal grandmother as a small child. Both grew up with a love of being outdoors, and they knew that they did not want to be confined to office jobs as adults.

The couple met as undergraduates at Utah State University, where Hitt majored in soils and horticulture, and House received her degree in forestry. Alex explains that, when he and Betsy finished college in 1981, “it was just the bare emergence of small, local farms…so we had to feel it out. It was not real clear as to how it would work, but we did want to live in the country…and not drive into town to make a living.” Though neither partner had ever lived in North Carolina, Alex’s parents had moved there while he was in college. Their decision to purchase land in North Carolina was influenced by the favorable climate, proximity to their families in North Carolina and New Jersey, and Alex’s preliminary trips to the area, where he saw the early promise of a market for locally grown food in the Triangle. Once they had honed in on the Piedmont, Alex Hitt carefully chose the land for Peregrine Farm. The property is located outside the town of Graham, in an unincorporated, rural community called Eli Whitney, sixteen miles west of the Carrboro Farmers’ Market. At the time the Hitts purchased their land, the quality of soil in the most North Carolina Piedmont ranged from mediocre to exhausted. Fresh from a degree in soils, Alex Hitt deliberately chose a farm with better soil than other properties he had seen in the area. The young couple lived in a tent on the property until they could afford to build a farmhouse, an experience that Betsy Hitt recalls as “an adventure.” For three decades, the Hitts have continued to improve their soil with innovative, sustainable farming practices.

---

82 Alex and Betsy Hitt, oral history conducted by Kate Medley for the Southern Foodways Alliance, August 23, 2011
83 Hitt oral history, August 23, 2011
Alex and Betsy Hitt coined the motto “Food with a face, a place, and a taste,” to describe and market the products they grow at Peregrine Farm.84 This motto alludes to the personal relationships that the Hitts have built with customers by their weekly presence at the Carrboro Farmers’ Market for twenty-seven seasons. The motto also affirms that the food is locally grown at a place that welcomes customers to visit and witness their operation in action. Finally, the motto suggests that the combination of personal attention (the face) and the soil (the place) results in delicious, high-quality food—the taste. Absent the French expression, the Hitts’ motto declares that produce from Peregrine Farm has a distinctive terroir.

***

Ben and Karen Barker met on the first day of culinary school at the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, New York, in the late 1970s. Karen grew up in Brooklyn, New York, the daughter of Jewish academics, and she developed a passion for baking as a young girl. She studied history as an undergraduate, but decided to forgo academia for culinary school, inspired by visionary women chefs, such as Alice Waters of Chez Panisse in Berkeley, California. Ben Barker was raised in Chapel Hill, where his father was a professor at the University of North Carolina’s Dental School. Both his maternal and paternal grandparents lived in Alamance County. The moved from farms into the city of Burlington to work in the textile mills during the Depression. Barker recalls that even though mill work allowed his grandparents to enter the urban middle class, “they still maintained that relationship and link to the land.”85

---

84Peregrine Farm, [www.peregrinefarm.net](http://www.peregrinefarm.net)
85Ben and Karen Barker, oral history conducted by Kate Medley for the Southern Foodways Alliance, July 10, 2011.
When he speaks about family history, Ben Barker, like Alex Hitt, stresses a connection to the land, specifically tied to southern agricultural heritage. Barker establishes his roots in the North Carolina Piedmont by recalling family meals with grandparents who kept gardens and continued to maintain vestiges of their agricultural identity even after they had moved into Burlington. He explains, “Our grandfather would raise root vegetables and ‘Ash’ potatoes—which is the way he said ‘Irish’—and white turnips and their greens, and tomatoes and squash and beans, and it was part of my great, fond memory of walking down there with him barefooted in those sandy rows and watching him make his selections for that moment’s meal.” Barker calls upon narratives from his childhood to establish the authenticity of the food he prepares at Magnolia Grill. He describes his cooking style as grounded in classic North Carolina Piedmont ingredients—with a heavy emphasis on the local and the seasonal—interpreted through European-inflected culinary techniques.

The Barkers cooked at La Residence in Chapel Hill from early 1982 through the summer of 1984. From there they moved to the Fearrington House in Pittsboro from August 1984 until August 1986. Three months later, they opened Magnolia Grill. The restaurant is housed in a nondescript, cinderblock building on Ninth Street in Old West Durham, a former mill neighborhood nestled between the East and West campuses of Duke University. The restaurant celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary in November 2011—a remarkable longevity, for a restaurant and even more so given that the same chefs have been at its helm since day one. Ben is in charge of all meal service—Magnolia serves dinner five nights a week—and Karen is the pastry chef.

***

86 Barker oral history, July 10, 2011

87 Ben Barker, e-mail correspondence, April 22, 2012
Peregrine Farm’s colorful produce stand at the Carrboro Farmers’ Market and the casual sophistication of Magnolia Grill also represent a mastery of visual narrative on the part of the Hitts and the Barkers. Though the two spaces obviously do not look alike, they share stylistic elements. The Hitts and the Barkers are both experts at mixing high and low to create an aesthetic that feels authentic, southern, and traditional, yet informed by education, a discerning palate, and decades of experience.

At Magnolia Grill, customers and restaurant critics alike have noted a disconnect between Magnolia’s humble exterior and the upscale food—with prices to match—that the Barkers serve inside. Most delight in the contrast, as if they had stumbled upon a hole-in-the-wall that by happenstance offers first-class food.88 The Barkers knew this in 1986 when they purchased the building from Lex Alexander, whose Wellspring Grocery had grown out of the relatively small space.89 Magnolia has an open kitchen, which was unusual for the time and place when the restaurant opened. Ben and Karen direct their employees, making sure that each dish meets their high standards. Twenty-five years after the restaurant opened, their nightly performance still captivates diners and barflies.

During the late summer and early fall of each Market season, Alex Hitt began a tradition suggestive of Magnolia Grill’s open kitchen. He roasts Peregrine Farm peppers in a metal hopper over an open flame. Customers and their children flock to Alex and his contraption. Many are eager to take a piece of the experience home and purchase the freshly


89“It was just a really neat space. And when you walked in there—it was really sort of astonishing in a way, because I said to Karen, ‘This place would make a great restaurant.’” Barker oral history, July 10, 2011 Eventually, Whole Foods would purchase Wellspring. Alexander would go on to open 3Cups, a coffee, tea, and wine shop on the east side of Chapel Hill with a heavy emphasis on telling its customers the story behind the products.
roasted peppers. Others snap photographs of the colorful activity. Hitt’s annual pepper-
roasting performance supports his assertion that, in addition to the relationships that he and
Betsy have built with customers over the years, one of his favorite aspects of the Carrboro
Farmers’ Market is “the theater involved.”

The Peregrine Farm stand is meticulously and attractively arranged in a style that
could be described as a tasteful “country chic.” Half the table is dedicated to Alex’s produce
and half to Betsy’s cut flowers. Neatly typed and laminated labels identify the varieties.
Betsy Hitt keeps longer flower stems in large buckets to arrange at the customer’s request.
An antique wooden Cheerwine crate—the classic North Carolina soft drink—sits front and
center on the table, holding glass vases of smaller arrangements, such as picture-perfect
spring anemones in red, pink, purple, and magenta. Lush heads of lettuce, from Romaine to
red-leaf, fill wicker baskets.

Both the Barkers and the Hitts have earned national accolades for their work. Ben and
Karen are the winners of prestigious awards from the James Beard Foundation, and Magnolia
Grill has appeared on multiple lists of the top fifty restaurants in the country. The Raleigh
News and Observer’s Greg Cox recently named Magnolia Grill as the Triangle’s “Best
Restaurant of 2011.” Cox described the restaurant as “the granddaddy of all old-timers in
terms of its influence on the local dining scene” and “a foodie mecca in the purest sense.”
“When it comes to the food,” wrote Cox, “Magnolia stands alone.” The Triangle restaurant
scene is filled with chefs who honed their skills under the Barkers’ tutelage. In 2010, a
feature on the Barkers in the Raleigh News and Observer reported this impressive statistic:
“Twenty-eight chefs who have worked in their kitchen have gone on to own their own

---

90 Hitt oral history, August 23, 2011.
restaurants or become executive chefs.\textsuperscript{92} The article was accompanied by a graphic, a family tree with forks and spatulas for branches, charting the paths of the Barkers’ culinary offspring. Many of them, such as Phoebe Lawless of Durham’s Scratch Bakery and Aaron Vandemark of Panciuto in Hillsborough, have gained reputations for the farm-to-table narratives their food evokes.

Alex and Betsy Hitt are recognized at the state and national level for their commitment to sustainable farming practices. They serve on several advisory boards for organizations committed to sustainable farming, from the Rural Advancement Foundation International (RAFI) to the Association of Specialty Cut Flower Growers. They have mentored many young farmers, some of whom are now vendors at the Carrboro and Durham farmers’ markets.

***

For decades, the Hitts have influenced what the Barkers cook, and the Barkers have influenced what the Hitts grow. For example, in the early 1990s, the Hitts began to raise white turnips—an unusual variety for the area at that time—at Ben Barker’s request. This collaborative inspiration for new recipes and new produce is based on conversation that occurs locally and globally. The two couples occasionally get together at one of their homes to pore over seed catalogs, and they have also taken to joint trips to Europe, where they have tasted new ingredients and dishes. These trips become part of the story they pass on to their customers.

Explains Betsy Hitt, “I think the chefs have helped push the Market community into some directions and crops that they would have never thought of before… And then there are

\textsuperscript{92}Weigel, Andrea. “From Two Chefs, Many.” Raleigh News and Observer, April 28, 2010.
things that we jointly arrive at. We have traveled with some of our chef friends, particularly the Barkers, to Italy and Spain and other places and have [both] tried a pepper or something and said, ‘Wow, that would be really great. I wonder if we could smuggle some seeds back to the States and do that.’ And so now we have some peppers and tomatoes and melons that we jointly found…. I think the Market allows for an atmosphere for that sort of exchange to go on.”

Michael Brinkley and Stanley Hughes: Home-grown heritage

Carrboro Farmers’ Market vendors Michael Brinkley, thirty-five, of Brinkley Farms in Creedmoor, North Carolina, and Stanley Hughes, sixty-four, of Pine Knot Farms in Hurdle Mills, North Carolina, are third-generation Piedmont tobacco and row-crop farmers. Brinkley joined the Carrboro Farmers’ Market in 2001, and Hughes began selling there in 2003. Ironically, their agricultural heritage makes Michael Brinkley and Stanley Hughes something of an anomaly at the Market, as most of the Carrboro Farmers’ Market vendors did not grow up on farms. After witnessing conventional tobacco wane as a reliable source of income in North Carolina, they changed the direction of their farming to stay on long-held family land. In the relatively short time that they have been selling their produce to directly to consumers through farmers’ markets and CSAs, Brinkley and Hughes have come to recognize the power of their respective family narratives.

***

93Hitt oral history, August 23, 2011


Michael Brinkley is only thirty-five years old, but he already has three decades of farming experience under his belt. He has lived his entire life Creedmoor, North Carolina, on land that his grandfather purchased in 1941. Even before that, Brinkley explains, “my great-granddaddy lived right down the road, and my great-great granddaddy lived right down the road. We’ve stayed local to the area for the past 150 years.”

Brinkley describes his forebears as “all-American subsistence farmers.” Beginning in the 1940s, his grandfather focused on tobacco—then a profitable cash crop—while maintaining limited acreage for livestock and a vegetable garden. Sometimes these provided additional income for the family. Explains Brinkley, “They did what I like to call ‘bootleg sausage.’ If they had a little extra pig…they’d sell to some neighbors…. And I’m sure they probably sold some produce years ago. I’ve heard them talk about doing some sweet potatoes.”

When Brinkley himself was a boy, his mother used to load up the farm truck with sweet corn and take him and his sister into Durham, where they would sell the corn and spend the money on new clothes and school supplies. Years later, he realized, “it wasn’t they couldn’t afford to buy stuff, but they were just teaching us a lesson: a very valuable lesson, that we had to work for a dollar.”

In contrast to the back-to-the-landers, who began to farm equipped with little more than romantic notions of their hands in the dirt, Michael Brinkley has known hard, physical work his whole life. He says that he started helping with farm chores when he was five. By the time he was seven, his father let him drive the tractor while the adults harvested tobacco and loaded it into the trailer. After all, reasons Brinkley, “it was a simple job; I was sitting on the tractor and everybody could watch me to make sure I was okay.”

---

96Brinkley oral history, July 19, 2011
97Brinkley oral history, July 19, 2011
98Brinkley oral history, July 19, 2011
to help the older men prime (harvest) the tobacco, which he said “either made a man out of you or killed you.”

Brinkley’s grandfather, and later his father, sold their tobacco crop each fall at the Durham auctions. Michael Brinkley vividly describes his family’s practice of taking the tobacco to market in Durham, which they still did when he was a child.

“Once they got done harvesting, they’d start taking tobacco out of the pack house, grading it into separate grades, and they made these picture-perfect, beautiful bundles they loaded on trucks, carried it to Durham, unloaded it in the warehouse floor…. That’s one thing I kind of hate: my kids won’t ever get to see the auctioneers. You’d have lines of buyers and auctioneers and then the farmers following behind, walking through the warehouse. The auctioneer was almost singing his auction buying tobacco. And you had all the buyers hollering, and it was almost like a circus event. [There were] a lot of people there, everybody having a good time, especially if prices were good.”

Michael Brinkley graduated from high school in 1995 and considered an off-farm career, taking classes to become a mechanic. But Hurricane Fran, a powerful storm that made landfall in September 1996 and wreaked havoc as far west as the central Piedmont, changed his plans. He stayed home to help his father take care of the damage the farm had sustained. That’s when, as he puts it, “the bug bit me, and that’s where I’ve been ever since.”

Brinkley’s commitment to the family farm has been steadfast but not always easy. By the late 1990s, it was becoming nearly impossible for small- and mid-sized farmers to make a living in conventional tobacco. Brinkley married his wife, Jennifer, in 1998, and they had their first child the next year. He needed to change what he was farming in order to support his family. The transition was especially difficult for Brinkley’s father, William Brinkley, a lifelong tobacco farmer. But they saw “a lot of future” in raising fruits and vegetables, as

99 Brinkley oral history, July 19, 2011
100 Brinkley oral history, July 19, 2011
demand for locally grown produce increased.\textsuperscript{101} They offered their first CSA subscriptions in 2001 to a corporate group at Research Triangle Park, and joined both the Carrboro and Durham Farmers’ Markets the following year. Today, Michael Brinkley takes Brinkley Farms brand produce, meat, eggs, and cornmeal to the Carrboro Farmers’ Market, and his father attends the Durham Farmers’ Market. That way, the family can reach twice as many market customers.

Michael Brinkley’s experience growing produce over the last twelve years demonstrates his remarkable flexibility and willingness to learn and try new things. He and his father began selling at farmers’ markets and filling CSA baskets with “the staple Southern items—corn, peas, butter beans, greens, and sweet potatoes.” Then they started offering a variety of cuts of pork and beef, along with eggs from their chickens. They still grow the old-fashioned favorites, but have expanded their offerings to please the sophisticated and cosmopolitan palates of farmers’ market customers in Durham and Carrboro. They now offer dozens of varieties of tomatoes, kale, lettuce, carrots, lettuce, field peas, and turnips—even kohlrabi. In fact, Michael Brinkley admits that as recently as two or three years ago, he had never heard of some of these crops. He even developed a rule of thumb to gauge the success of a new crop: “If daddy shook his head and said, ‘what in the hell is this?’—Then it was going to do pretty good…. But he doesn’t say that much anymore.”

At the Brinkley Farms stand at the Carrboro Farmers’ Market, there is no pretense. The tables are covered with vinyl gingham tablecloths. Price labels are handwritten in black Sharpie marker on index cards. A simple, plastic insulated cooler—the kind you might take to the beach or to a tailgate—holds packaged cuts of meat. Field peas are packed in quart-
size Ziploc bags emblazoned with a simple, red-and-white Brinkley Farms sticker. Michael Brinkley stands behind the center table, tall and a bit paunchy, with bright blue eyes and a genuine smile. He is flanked by a pair of white teenage boys, members of the FFA at their high school in Creedmoor. All three wear Carhartt jackets and baseball caps; Michael’s is a camouflage print embroidered with a “Got to be NC Agriculture” logo. Between polite interactions with customers, the boys jokingly tease each other about girls.

On warmer days, Brinkley wears a grey, short-sleeved uniform work shirt, reminiscent of the auto mechanic he once thought about becoming. The shirt has a patch printed with BRINKLEY FARMS on the left side of the chest, and one with MICHAEL stitched in cursive on the right. While many vendors wear Carrboro Farmers’ Market T-shirts on market days, few have farm uniforms like Brinkley’s. Unlike many of his colleagues, Michael Brinkley self-identifies as “blue-collar,” with both the social and economic connotations that label confers. Put another way, he doesn’t come from people who would necessarily shop at a market like this.

The Brinkley Farms market stand telegraphs approachability, which can be especially attractive to less affluent shoppers or those who do not consider themselves “foodies.” Brinkley explains, “Our customers range; it’s no one group. We’ve got college professors, college students, and everybody in between, your blue-collar workers, white-collar workers; I’ve seen some top state officials. [I’m] dealing with people that I never thought I’d be dealing with, and then people more like what I consider myself: just more kind of laid-back, blue-collar type people. We deal with a little bit of everybody.”

***

102 One suspects that, especially for members of the back-to-the-land movement, a major reason they got into farming was to avoid this sort of conformity.
Stanley Hughes was born in 1948 and raised on 125 acres of land that his grandfather had purchased in the Hurdle Mills community—which straddles Orange and Person counties—in 1912. His family’s is a remarkable legacy of African-American landownership.

When Hughes was growing up, his family farm was planted almost entirely in tobacco. Many southern farmers still used draft labor, or a combination of animals and machines, to work the land. Hughes says, “I can remember back when I was real small we were plowing mules, and I wanted to plow the mules myself…. Then, after I got large enough to start plowing mules…I wanted to use a tractor.”

The family took their tobacco to markets in the nearby cities of Durham, Mebane, and Roxboro, North Carolina, and Danville, Virginia—“wherever they felt like they could get the best dollar for it at the time.” As a teenager, Hughes decided that he didn’t want to work on the farm anymore. He dreamed of buying the same thing as many teenage boys in the 1960s: a car, the symbol of middle-class status and freedom.

For years Hughes worked off-farm jobs, first at a tire factory in Roxboro and then for twelve years at Nortel, a telecommunications company that was based at the Research Triangle Park. During most of that time, he continued to live on the family land and farm part-time on the side. In 1996, Hughes left Nortel as the company was downsizing. Then in his late forties, he decided to return to farming full-time.

Serendipitously, just as conventional tobacco was becoming less profitable, the organic tobacco company Santa Fe, which makes Natural American Spirit cigarettes, moved its headquarters to Oxford, North Carolina. Hughes explained that, at the time, conventional tobacco was “barely getting two dollars a pound.” Santa Fe offered to pay farmers twice that

---

103Stanley Hughes oral history, July 10, 2011
price for organic tobacco. First, Hughes had to let his fields lie fallow for three years in order for the land to be certified as organic. But ultimately it was time well spent.

While the tobacco fields were in transition, Hughes increased his cultivation of produce. To begin, he focused on a pair of totemic southern vegetables: collards and sweet potatoes.\(^\text{104}\) Making the most of the infrastructure the farm already had, he explains, “we used the tobacco barn for storing and curing the sweet potatoes.” Though collards and sweet potatoes are still their specialty, Pine Knot Farms also grows other varieties of greens and potatoes, as well as corn, beets, cabbage, tomatoes, and more.

Hughes learned about the Carrboro and Durham farmers’ markets from county agricultural extension agents and Carolina Farm Stewardship Association volunteers, who wanted to feature Pine Knot Farms on one of their popular Piedmont farm tours. He applied and was accepted to both markets, but he was reluctant to go at first. Hughes began selling his Pine Knot Farms produce at the Carrboro Farmers’ Market in 2003, and since then he and his wife, Linda Leach, have become Market fixtures.\(^\text{105}\) In fact, Stanley Hughes has been nicknamed “the Mayor of the Carrboro Market” because he spends so much time socializing with the other vendors. On Saturday mornings he can be seen walking from stand to stand, occasionally taking a load off in one of The Chairman’s cedar Adirondack chairs by the gazebo. The ritual is a strategic one, Hughes explains: “I feel like that’s part of the PR relations. You’ve got to see what the other farmers are doing. You’re going to be competitive, so see what they’re doing, how they do it. And they ask me the same things.”\(^\text{106}\) Hughes also buys from fellow Market vendors. He particularly enjoys Brinkley Farms

\(^\text{104}\)Pine Knot Farms collards were featured in a 2003 produce issue of *Gourmet* magazine.

\(^\text{105}\)Meanwhile, Hughes’s cousin represents Pine Knot Farms at the Durham Farmers’ Market.

\(^\text{106}\)Stanley Hughes oral history, July 10, 2011
cornmeal as well as the flower arrangements from Betsy Hitt of Peregrine Farm and Leah Cook of Wild Hare Farm in Cedar Grove.

While Hughes makes his rounds at the Market, his wife, Linda Leach, displays her savvy marketing skills at the Pine Knot Farms stand. Leach is frank as she explains how she assembles Pine Knot Farms’ visual narrative each week at the Market:

“At the Carrboro Farmers’ Market, I am the one that’s in charge of setting up my displays, making certain that it’s all cohesive, because I’m one of those that believes that appearance is everything. I use red and blue totes with navy-and-white gingham checked tablecloths, and I have a matching banner that we hang up with the name of the farm: Pine Knot Farms, Certified Organic…. And then…in my center table—that same logo with the name, same design as the banner—it matches…. And I make certain that everything is displayed where it will be eye-catching.”

Leach is also famous at the Market for offering generous samples every Saturday, during what she calls “sample hour.” She believes that tasting the food Pine Knot Farms has to offer can entice customers to make purchases they would not have made otherwise. On one Saturday morning in the early spring of 2012, one of her helpers offered passing customers paper plates loaded with three different varieties of roasted sweet potatoes: orange, purple, and white. The sweet potatoes were accompanied by an extra savory treat: a bite-sized portion of Leach’s sausage casserole.

Though Stanley Hughes admits that “tobacco really pays the bills” for his family, he loves the community of the Carrboro Farmers’ Market. He believes that the customers “really support what you’re doing. They’re there for you.” This kind of personal interaction isn’t available in today’s tobacco market, now that the auction system has ended and growers contract directly with cigarette companies. But customers at the Carrboro Farmers’ Market still want a story to go along with their sweet potatoes, and Stanley Hughes and Linda Leach

---

107 Hughes oral history, July 10, 2011 (Leach joined the oral history for part of the conversation)
are happy to grant their wish.

**Eliza MacLean and Rufus Brown: The “cure” for the common ham**

Eliza MacLean of Cane Creek Farm in Snow Camp, North Carolina, has been selling meat at the Carrboro Farmers’ Market since 2004. Despite a love of animals that began in childhood, forty-six-year-old MacLean didn’t set out to become a farmer. In 1994, at age twenty-eight, the New York City native moved to North Carolina to begin a master’s program in environmental toxicology at Duke’s Nicholas School of the Environment.108 Prior to entering graduate school, MacLean had been working at the Marine Mammal Center in Berkeley, California. She planned to return to the Bay Area to continue this work after receiving her master’s degree. But she and her then-partner ended up purchasing ten acres of land in rural Saxapahaw, some fifteen miles west of Carrboro. They began to raise goats, ducks, and chickens—at first as a hobby.

Cane Creek Farm took shape a few years later, when MacLean joined forces with Dr. Charles Sydnor and moved her operation and her family out to Snow Camp. MacLean says that when she met Sydnor, “he was massively acquiring land out here in Snow Camp, and had amassed over 500 acres. And he said, ‘You need land, and I need a marketer.’”109

In 2000, MacLean gave birth to fraternal twins Quinn and Enid. In need of additional income, she discovered the work of the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy (ALBC). Headquartered in Pittsboro, North Carolina, the ALBC is a national, nonprofit organization

---

108 Eliza MacLean, oral history conducted by Sara Camp Arnold for the Southern Foodways Alliance, September 13, 2011. MacLean explains environmental toxicology as “the study of chemicals that we use in the environment and how they and their metabolites, what they break down to, actually don’t go anywhere. And they just literally sit in our soils and our sediments and our estuaries and all the very special places where life begins, and it affects all the rest of us up the food chain.” As I will discuss, her scientific education influences the decisions she makes as a farmer.

109 MacLean oral history, September 13, 2011
whose mission focuses on “ensuring the future of agriculture through genetic conservation and the promotion of endangered breeds of livestock and poultry.” Through the ALBC, MacLean was hired by Chuck Talbott to manage a herd of Tamworth hogs at North Carolina A&T State University.

Though she had worked with many animals throughout her life, both as a veterinarian’s assistant and in her first years of farming, the job at A&T gave MacLean her first experience with pigs. She was quickly hooked. In 2002, MacLean’s colleagues at A&T received a grant of more than $200,000 from the Golden LEAF Foundation, a Rocky Mount, North Carolina–based nonprofit organization that promotes economic development in areas of the state that were formerly dependent on tobacco. MacLean’s job was to distribute young hogs and breeding stock (a heritage cross-breed) to farmers in the Eastern part of the state, who would then finish raising the pigs and sell them to the California-based, upscale meat distributor Niman Ranch.

MacLean and her colleagues in the Golden LEAF hog project assisted about seventy farmers to enter the heritage pork business in Eastern North Carolina. “I looked around me and I saw nobody was doing it in the Chapel Hill-Durham area,” recalled MacLean, “and so I decided to bring some home myself.” She began to raise a variety of heritage breeds including Tamworths, Berkshires, Gloucestershire Old Spots, and Ossabaws. Pork became Cane Creek’s flagship product.

110 American Livestock Breeds Conservancy, albc-usa.org

111 Please see www.goldenleaf.org and www.nimanranch.com for more information.

112 MacLean oral history, September 13, 2011

113 See also Kaminsky, Peter. Pig Perfect: Encounters with Remarkable Swine and Some Great Ways to Cook Them. New York: Hyperion, 2005, which includes a profile of MacLean and Cane Creek Farm focused on the early days of her Ossabaw-raising efforts.
Shortly after MacLean’s children were born, she and her partner split. In the midst of a divorce and struggling with the responsibility of raising twins as a single mother, MacLean found a new calling. Her passion for farming was rooted in her love of animals and her academic background in environmental science. When she began to raise pigs, she felt something deeper. “My entire schizophrenic past came together with this idea that I could actually story of show a better way to raise livestock in particular, rather than boycotting it—that the eating of meat—because as a human species we’re never going to stop. It’s steeped in our history and our rituals and everything, and frankly, it’s good for us in small amounts, and in the right way…. The fact that you could actually do it naturally, sustainably, safely for the animal, the consumer, and the environment all at once—I was just hooked. And it’s been—it’s been sort of a calling ever since.”

To bring a pig to market, MacLean needed a slaughter facility. She joined forces with Jerry Matkins, the second-generation owner of Matkins Meats in Caswell County, about forty minutes north of her farm. Founded in 1956, Matkins caters to small farmers and hunters. When MacLean began to work with Matkins, his business was on the verge of collapse. He had been working at the family abbatoir since he was a teenager, but there were barely enough small livestock farmers in the state to keep the business in operation. In the past ten years, many new, small livestock farms have started up in the Piedmont. Customers such as those at the Carrboro Farmers’ Market are demanding pastured, heritage-breed meat raised without hormones or antibiotics. Now, MacLean explains, “I bring people and introduce them to him all the time…. We are absolutely reliant on this person. He is the key to my business. Without him, I cannot sell my product.”

---

114 MacLean oral history, September 13, 2011
115 MacLean oral history, September 13, 2011
slaughtering, processing, and packaging of MacLean’s pigs, goats, and cows. He also prepares Cane Creek Farm brand sausages using MacLean’s recipes. (With her meat handler’s license, MacLean can sell meat that has been packaged by an approved processor.) She is especially proud of the fact that, thanks to her business and that of others like her, “an independent entity that can process a small farmer’s red meat is actually a viable business in this state right now, when it really almost wasn’t.”

During MacLean’s first season at the Wednesday market in 2004, “I didn’t make that much money…but it was a place to sell and become recognized. And I basically sold the bulk of a pig—the ham, the shank, the shoulders, the belly—to restaurants. And then I used the rest of the trim and whatever piece—maybe one of the hams—in the sausage. So I was figuring out very quickly how to utilize the whole animal and make value-added products and have a market for those value-added products.”

Today, thanks to her delicious pork and her marketing savvy, about half of Eliza MacLean’s annual revenue comes from the Carrboro Farmers’ Market. The other half of her income comes from selling Cane Creek Farm brand meat to restaurants. Seven years ago, there were hardly any other meat vendors at the market, and only MacLean sold pork. Poultry and meat were sold at the Chapel Hill curb market through the 1950s, but by the early 2000s, local producers were difficult to find due to the United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) slaughter and meat-handling regulations. But interest in locally raised meat and poultry rapidly grew among both customers and farmers. Consulting with Sheila Neal, then the manager of the Carrboro Farmers’ Market, a handful of vendors formed a

116 MacLean oral history, September 13, 2011
117 MacLean oral history, September 13, 2011
“meat committee” and met for a year to craft bylaws for selling meat at the market.\footnote{Eliza MacLean, personal interview, November 9, 2011}

In the end, they agreed upon rules that in some ways are even stricter than the USDA and state requirements. The farmers took such precautions to protect their own reputations and the overall reputation of the market. For example, in the state of North Carolina, a poultry farmer can slaughter and sell—free of sales tax—up to 1,000 chickens on his or her own farm annually. But CFM requires that poultry be slaughtered at a state or USDA-inspected facility.\footnote{The USDA and North Carolina Department of Agriculture safety and sanitation rules for meat slaughter are essentially the same. The difference is that a USDA-inspected facility can sell its product across state lines, where as a NCDA-inspected facility can only sell its meat within North Carolina. Matkins Meats and Johnston County Hams are both federally inspected facilities. As a rule, Eliza does not ship her products, though she could.} Against the wishes of some vendors who wanted more freedom to produce their own meats—and to save money by doing so—the CFM meat committee chose to err on the side of safety. They also created requirements for how long a farmer must own the animal before it is slaughtered. Poultry must hatch from eggs on the farm or be purchased when the chick is just one day old. Other animals must be raised on the farm at least from the time they are weaned. Some farmers hoped to form a co-op and purchase a slaughter facility together. This did not come to fruition. While MacLean believes that some of the meat committee members were disappointed by this choice, it has been an undeniable boon to other small businesses in the state, including but not limited to Matkins Meats.\footnote{Eliza MacLean, personal interview, November 9, 2011}

***

Today, if you ask MacLean which of her products she is most proud of, she opens a package of her fifteen-month Ossabaw prosciutto.

Rufus Brown, in his mid-forties, is the man behind that prosciutto. He has lived in Smithfield, North Carolina, since his childhood and has cured hams at Johnston County
Hams for nearly that long. In 1967, his father, Jesse Brown, was hired to oversee curing operations for Johnston County Hams, a locally owned company in business since 1946.\textsuperscript{121} Rufus Brown joined his father in the curing facility in high school, and the company promised him a job post-graduation after he graduated from the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. As planned, the younger Brown returned to his father’s side after earning a degree in business and accounting. When Jesse Brown died in 1996, his son took over as manager and curemaster at Johnston County Hams. Today, Rufus Brown oversees a team of nine employees, most of them Latino men in their thirties and forties.

A few years ago, Scott Woodard, son of the owners of Johnston County Hams, decided that the company should develop a premium line of its own cured pork products, not unlike a reserve-label wine. A graduate of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Woodard owns his own marketing and consulting firm, Artisan Interactive. He added the “Curemaster’s Reserve” brand, a top-of-the-line country ham, to Johnston County Hams’ product line. The “Curemaster,” of course, was Rufus Brown. Tapping into the upscale consumer’s desire for authenticity, scarcity, and artisanship, Woodard promoted Brown as a second-generation “keeper of the flame,” the master of a dying art. At first, Brown admits, he thought the “Curemaster’s Reserve” idea was silly. But soon he recognized its value for the business: “Like the stock market or anything, it’s based on people’s perception.”\textsuperscript{122} Though Brown describes himself as humble and says that he does not like to be the center of attention, he has accepted the title of “Curemaster” and the recent attention it has brought him. His father, on the other hand, “would have eaten it up,” laughs Brown, recalling an

\textsuperscript{121}Johnston County Hams. “The Flavorful Legacy of Jesse Brown, ‘Ham King of the South’” www.countrycuredhams.com/our-heritage
\textsuperscript{122}Rufus Brown, personal interview, November 7, 2011
article in *Esquire* magazine in which the famed Southern chef Bill Neal crowned Jesse Brown “The Ham King.” “And you know, I was asking Dad, I said, ‘What does it mean, The Ham King? Is that east of the Mississippi? The United States?’ He said, ‘The World.’”**123**

The once-reluctant heir to The Ham King’s throne recognizes that contemporary consumers “want something with a story behind it,” and they are willing to pay a premium for that story.**124**

Eliza MacLean found Rufus Brown through heritage-pork aficionado Sam Suchoff, the young chef-owner of The Pig restaurant in Chapel Hill. She convinced Rufus to add her Ossabaw hams to his curing repertoire. Ossabaws and Mangalitsas—another heritage breed that Brown cures in small quantities—are similar in that they are smaller pigs with a higher fat content than the Durocs that Brown cured for much of his career. Brown is able to use the older curing techniques he first learned from his father on the Ossabaw and Mangalitsa hams. He recognizes the value of keeping the “Curemaster’s Reserve” line a small, niche market, and plans to avoid over-distribution of the product. Despite requests from other heritage pork producers, Brown has no plans to accept additional clients besides Heath Putnam (the Mangalitsa farmer, who does not live in North Carolina) and MacLean. He hopes to experiment with other cured, ready-to-eat products such as salami and pepperoni, but the USDA paperwork and additional inspection requirements for those products are more than Brown is able to handle currently.

***

In North Carolina, as in much of the South, hogs were traditionally slaughtered after the first frost and cured throughout the winter, spring, and summer. The curing rooms at

---

**123**Rufus Brown, personal interview, November 7, 2011

**124**Rufus Brown, personal interview, November 7, 2011
Johnston County Hams mimic these seasonal variations in temperature and humidity. When the hams first arrive, they are packed in salt and kept in a 38-degree room at low humidity for five to six weeks, depending on the size and fat content of the particular ham. After that, the hams are rinsed off and hung up to dry in the equalizer—a room with moderate humidity and a temperature of 50 degrees—for about two weeks. Finally, they hang at 80 degrees and 60% humidity for at least a month, where excess fat and water drips onto a sawdust-covered floor. A regular Johnston County Ham takes a minimum of ninety days to cure, at which point it is ready to be packaged and sold as country ham.\textsuperscript{125}

According to Brown, the only real difference between country ham and prosciutto is the curing time. After curing for three to four months, country ham needs to be baked in the oven or fried in a skillet before it is good to eat. Prosciutto, on the other hand, might cure for eight months to a year or more. That way, even more moisture comes out, and the finished product is ready to eat with no cooking required. MacLean’s Ossabaw hogs are slaughtered at fourteen to seventeen months, and they cure for a total of fifteen months.\textsuperscript{126}

After they leave the “summer” room, the Ossabaws hang on wooden beams in a special curing attic that has been in use for over half a century. Built of wood and accessed by a rickety spiral staircase, such a facility would never be approved by the USDA today. But the attic has been grandfathered in, and MacLean believes that it is the secret to the taste and texture of her Ossabaw prosciutto. For cured meat enthusiasts, the attic is pure romance. As MacLean explains, this is about as close as you can get in the United States today to the sort

\textsuperscript{125} Rufus Brown, personal interview, November 7, 2011, and guided tour of Johnston County Hams curing facility

\textsuperscript{126} Johnston County Hams is not a slaughterhouse. Jerry Matkins slaughters the Ossabaw hogs, and MacLean brings them to Smithfield for Brown to cure. See also Bowen, Dana. “‘Taste My Proscuitto,’ He Said with a Drawl.” \textit{The New York Times}, September 17, 2003. (Profile of Rufus Brown.)
of facilities in Italy and Spain that cure the sought-after *prosciutto di Parma* and *jamón ibérico*. Brown does not eat country ham frequently. He enjoys it around the holidays and occasionally brings it on camping trips with his thirteen-year-old son’s Boy Scout troop. But he admits, “If I’m going to eat that prosciutto-style ham, I’d say now I prefer that Mangalitsa. Or the Ossabaw. They’ve got that fat content, so more of a smooth, buttery flavor to it.”

When the fifteen-month curing process is over, Brown carves MacLean’s Ossabaw prosciutto into thin slices and seals it in four-ounce vacuum packs. She then sells it at the Carrboro Farmers’ Market and to a handful of local restaurants. When you compliment her on the rich taste of the prosciutto, she may brag about her pigs first, but is quick to praise Brown’s skill in the curing process.

Eliza MacLean and Rufus Brown are important small-scale producers who have created a niche market by maintaining traditional, time-intensive methods of production. They are at odds with an industrial food system that pushes for faster, bigger, and cheaper, although respecting the slower curing methods is difficult. Regardless of the challenges, they both feel a great sense of accomplishment. Brown says that he has stayed with Johnston County Hams “for the love of the business,” even though the USDA regulations threaten to “take some of the artisan part out of it.”

MacLean describes farming as “not only my livelihood; it’s the means to a really rich life.” Both of them—a veteran of the meat processing business and a relative newcomer to livestock farming—are in the right place at the right time. At the Carrboro Farmers’ Market, consumers want to know where their food comes from, who made it, and whether it was produced in an environmentally sustainable

---

127 Rufus Brown, Personal Interview, November 7, 2011
128 Rufus Brown, Personal Interview, November 7, 2011
129 MacLean oral history, September 13, 2011
fashion. Fresh, local fruits and vegetables have been available at the Market for decades. Meat is an exciting new product. Market customers care that the food is “authentic,” and MacLean and Brown have exactly that story for sale.

Rob Segovia-Welsh: Food is political!

Rob Segovia-Welsh was fired from his first post-college job for union organizing. The setting was not a Depression-era coal mine or an automobile factory. It was the turn of the twenty-first century, and Segovia-Welsh was working with at-risk teenage boys at a youth home in Northern Wisconsin. So perhaps it should come as no surprise that he’s found a way to bake political activism into the loaves of his Chicken Bridge Bakery bread.

Segovia-Welsh grew up in a steel-mill town in Ohio. His father, who was laid off from the mill when he and his sister were young children, spent a few years as a stay-at-home dad. But, recalls Segovia-Welsh, his father was eager to get back to the workforce and eventually found another job. Then his mother opened a home-based day care, which allowed her to have an income while being at home with her own children. He recalls her baking Amish-style bread at home with a natural starter similar to sourdough, but he does not remember helping her with the bread or learning the process at her side.

His first bakery job came in his twenties. He and his wife (then fiancée), Monica Balderas Segovia-Welsh, were living in Ashland, Wisconsin, where they had both graduated from Northland College. Balderas went to work in a local bakery called Daily Bread, which Segovia-Welsh likens to a smaller version of Weaver Street Market. Segovia-Welsh was a counselor at a home for at-risk teenage boys. Shortly before he and Balderas married, Segovia-Welsh and some of his colleagues at the youth home tried to unionize. He returned
from his honeymoon to find himself out of a job. Daily Bread was hiring, and Segovia-Welsh needed employment. His new bride became his boss.

Eventually, the couple left Wisconsin and spent several months traveling in Latin America, where both of them, but especially he, became enamored with cob ovens. Cob ovens are made out of a mix of sand, straw, and clay, and they appear as vernacular baking structures in many parts of the world. During their travels Monica Segovia-Welsh became pregnant, and the couple moved to Carrboro in 2005 to be near one of her siblings. After a stint in construction, Rob Segovia-Welsh worked at Ninth Street Bakery in Durham and then in the bakery department of Weaver Street Market in Carrboro. Eventually the couple and their young son, Simon, rented a house on Chicken Bridge Road in Chatham County and built their first backyard cob oven. The oven at the house they currently own is actually the third one they have built.

Segovia-Welsh enjoyed his commercial bakery jobs. For several years, he worked part-time for the North Carolina Department of Labor while still baking part-time at Weaver Street. His job with the Department of Labor was to travel around the state to inspect working and living conditions at migrant farm camps. Segovia-Welsh is fluent in Spanish and hoped that the job would allow him to help the state’s immigrant farm laborers, many of whom live and work in deplorable conditions. But the work was incredibly frustrating.

As soon as he and his wife built their first oven, Segovia-Welsh realized that he took special pleasure in baking bread in a hearth of his own construction. He explains, “I knew when we moved out to the Chicken Bridge house that I wasn’t going to be able to keep doing this [state] job forever, because it was too stressful and too demoralizing. And so when we were deciding on how big to build the oven, I was thinking, ‘Well, it’s not going to take that
much more material or labor to build it just a little bit bigger, so if *some time* in the future I’m baking more than what we would eat just for our family, that would be nice not to have to rebuild an oven.’… And eventually I thought, ‘You know, I would be much more motivated to bake on a routine basis if I had people that I was supplying bread to. And that would be really kind of cool.”’

By this time, Monica Segovia-Welsh had taken a job as the pastry chef at Lantern, an acclaimed farm-to-table Asian restaurant in Chapel Hill. The couple began Chicken Bridge Bakery as an informal way to share their bread with friends and make a little extra money in the process. They named it after the road they lived on when they built their first cob oven. In 2008, while they were still living on Chicken Bridge Road, Segovia-Welsh recalls, “We started doing a CSB—our Community-Supported Bread. And it started just with ten people, and it was weekly. People would just come and pick up their bread. And I found that was a really good way to get me motivated to start doing it. And that’s how it started.” His customers were his friends, and they knew exactly where their bread came from. In fact, some of them had attended the “work party” during which the Segovia-Welshes’ friends helped them mix the cob and construct the oven. The clay and sand for the cob were essentially “foraged” from the surrounding landscape.

When the CSB first started, he admits, neither the home kitchen nor the oven was inspected. That had to change in 2009, the year Chicken Bridge was accepted to the Carrboro Farmers’ Market. The Market requires its prepared-food vendors to cook out of approved commercial kitchens. So for the better part of a year, Segovia-Welsh had to compromise his

---

130 Personal interview with Rob Segovia-Welsh, November 16, 2011

131 Rob does most of the work for Chicken Bridge Bakery. Monica works full-time as the pastry chef at Lantern. Still, she helps Rob with the baking on her days off, and he almost always refers to the bakery as “ours,” not “mine,” both in conversation and on the Chicken Bridge website.
preference for wood-fired breads in order to meet the market’s health and safety regulations. He would prepare his doughs at home and bake them on Friday nights at Lantern restaurant, heading straight down the road to the Carrboro Farmers’ Market in the mornings without a wink of sleep. After a few months, he realized, “I’m making more doing bread than I am at the state job, and the state job…. had really just gotten to be so stressful. So in August of 2010, I quit the state job.” Finally able to focus on Chicken Bridge Bakery full-time, Rob Segovia-Welsh turned his attention to creating the bakery at the couple’s new home on River Forest Road while still using the kitchen at Lantern on Friday nights. Later that year, Chicken Bridge Bakery received its home bakery certification.

Segovia-Welsh sells a variety of breads, as well as hearth-baked granola, gougeres, scones, and bread pudding, on Wednesdays and Saturdays at the Carrboro Farmers’ Market. In the past year, he has begun to engage in a fascinating form of communication with Market customers by stenciling political slogans on loaves of his bread. He cuts the stencils out of cardboard cereal boxes using an X-acto knife, and then he places them on the loaf of bread and dusts flour over them. Segovia-Welsh began in the fall of 2011 with a crown—a round loaf of bread—displayed at his Market stand declaring, FOOD IS POLITICAL!—accompanied by a fist holding a carrot, the symbol of the Food Not Bombs movement. Segovia-Welsh stencils decorative designs such as roosters on many of his loaves of bread, but usually bakes only one loaf per week—if that—with a political slogan or other topical message. Still, these loaves have quickly gained attention at the Market and on Chicken Bridge Bakery’s Facebook page.
The political loaves have been overwhelmingly well-received by the customers at the Carrboro Farmers’ Market. Segovia-Welsh displays them at his stand, where they spark comments, questions, and conversation. He explains,

“Some of it is marketing of who we are. And knowing that that’s acceptable in Carrboro. Or that that would be a draw in Carrboro instead of a turnoff. And so if people don’t remember Chicken Bridge Bakery, they’ll be like, ‘Oh, that guy that does the stencils.’

I feel lucky [that] we live in this area, where it was easy to take [the “Food Is Political” loaf] to market and to share that with people. And it was a sentiment that was shared in the community. And on different levels. So people had their own take on it. And so, it could mean what I wanted it to mean, and it could mean what somebody wanted.”

But Segovia-Welsh is also clear that the Chicken Bridge Bakery brand is not just about political activism; it’s an honest reflection of the lifestyle that he and his wife have chosen. When asked how he would introduce his business to a new customer, he offered a clearly articulated expression of his mission, one that many of his fellow Market vendors would be proud to share.

“So the things that I want people to know are that we’re a family-run, small, market-driven, artisan bakery. We built an oven out of earthen material that came from close by the house, and we try to get a lot of our ingredients for our bread from the farmers here and from people that are growing it locally…. There’s lots of touchstones, and catchy phrases—‘oh! Organic! Artisan! Local!’—and it’s true. But I also think that unless you came to the Market, you would not get products like this. From jams and pickles and vegetables, to breads and pies and everything. So in some ways I feel like, yeah, I want people to know that it is all of those catchphrase-y things, but it is also real life. And this is really how we’re making a living. And I think that it is a pretty unique thing.”

Carla Shuford: “There’s early, and then there’s Carla”

Even if you are a devoted Carrboro Farmers’ Market customer, you have probably never seen sixty-nine-year-old Carla Shuford at Market. But if you ask the farmers to identify the Market’s iconic customers, many will name Carla Shuford. You may not see Shuford because she has finished her shopping by the time you arrive at the Market. When you are

132Personal interview with Rob Segovia-Welsh, April 3, 2012

133Personal interview with Rob Segovia-Welsh, April 3, 2012
fumbling for your car keys and your canvas tote bag, to make your way to Carrboro, Shuford is already back home, donning her swimsuit to swim laps at the YMCA.

Shuford grew up on a dairy and subsistence farm near the town of Tryon, in the western North Carolina Mountains. In the late 1950s, her father was an early convert to organic farming methods. Not unlike the tomato club girls of the generation before hers, Shuford remembers selling produce from her family’s farm when she was a young girl in order to make some pocket money. Even though the fruits and vegetables on the farm were mainly grown for the family’s consumption, “when I was about fourteen or fifteen I ran a little store in the summer when school was out down at the farm. It was open three days—afternoons—a week, and it was called ‘Carla’s Commissary.’ And my father would contribute vegetables and so forth.”

At age fifteen, Shuford was diagnosed with a form of cancer called osteogenic sarcoma, and her left leg was amputated. After surgery, her prognosis was dire. Consulting with Dr. Max Gerson in New York City, Shuford adopted the Gerson Therapy, a strict diet based on organic fruit and vegetable juices, supplemented with calf’s liver. Her cancer never returned. Fifty-three years later, she attributes her survival to a produce-centric diet supplemented with whole grains and protein from fish and free-range eggs.

Shuford, who retired from a secretarial position at the University of North Carolina in 1988, has been a devoted patron of the Carrboro Farmers’ Market since its inception in 1979. She refers to the farmers as her medical team, friends, and family. She is consistently the first patron to arrive at the Saturday Market, where she buys crates of fruits, vegetables, eggs, bread, and grains before the sun has cleared the horizon. As Betsy Hitt explains, “There’s

134 Oral History with Carla Shuford, conducted by Sara Camp Arnold for the Southern Foodways Alliance, August 24, 2011
early, and then there’s Carla.” An almost literal interpretation of “you are what you eat” has defined Carla Shuford’s life for over half a century. She estimates that ninety-five percent of what she eats comes from the Carrboro Farmers’ Market. “I buy fish from the local market [Tom Robinson seafood in Carrboro], but I get olive oil and herb teas [from the store]. The joke with the farmers is that if they sold toilet paper, I’d never have to go in a commercial store for anything else.”

Carla Shuford is a far cry from the stereotype of the yuppie marketgoer, nor does she bear much resemblance to the other Carrboro Farmers’ Market customers of her age group. Shuford does not come to the market to browse or to linger. She knows exactly what she wants to buy, and in what quantities, before she arrives. Once she gets there, Shuford says, “I mean business.” Though she chats briefly and warmly with each of the farmers she patronizes, Shuford limits her interactions with other market customers. This is partly an issue of mobility; she walks on crutches, and it is easier to do her shopping early in the morning, before the Market becomes crowded. Nor does she have precious notions of unblemished produce; she opts for quantity over appearance. Shuford explains, “[The farmers] know I buy in quantity and I have a very limited income, so they will often have picked out some of the number twos. But they’re not number twos to me, because they haven’t been sprayed or fertilized. They’re number twos because they aren’t absolutely picture perfect.” To prove her point, Shuford opens her refrigerator and pulls out a crisper drawer full of bruised and blemished apples. She will eat every one of them before the week is out.

135 Shuford oral history, August 24, 2011
136 Shuford oral history, August 24, 2011
137 Shuford oral history, August 24, 2011
When Shuford consumes produce from the Carrboro Farmers’ Market, she is ingesting place. It is important to her to know how the food was grown, and what kind of nutrients are in the soil. She buys from both organic and conventional farmers as long as the food has not been sprayed with chemicals. She trusts the farmers to tell her the difference.

Shuford’s body tells a narrative of survival. In her words, she is “religious” about two things: swimming and going to the Carrboro Farmers’ Market. Both of these activities are directly related to the health and strength of Shuford’s body, but, like a religious believer, they comfort her spirit as well. In August of 2011, she reflected, “Come this September 4th, it will be—if I make it that long—fifty-three years since my leg was removed, and I’ve never had a touch of cancer since…. And I attribute it to almost solely to my diet, and I think of the vendors at the Farmers’ Market as my medical team. And I think of food as my medicine—and not in a bad way…. I prefer to go straight to the farmers. I want a face to associate with the food that goes in my body.”

One story in particular represents the deep importance of the relationships Shuford shares with the farmers at the Carrboro Farmers’ Market. Shuford, who has never been married and lives alone, used to have a cat named Mary Smith. All of the farmers knew about her. In 2001, Mary Smith was twenty-two years old, and due to her deteriorating health, the time had come for her to be put down. The veterinarian could perform the procedure at eleven o’clock on a Saturday. As always, Shuford went to the Market first thing that morning.

“\[Shuford\] got up and went to the Market and was teary. And first of all, John Soehner saw me and he said, ‘What’s wrong, Carla?’ And I told him, ‘Mary Smith.’ And he said, ‘Take whatever you want from my table today, please; no charge.’ I went to Doris and Keith Lewis and got a bouquet of pink roses to put on her—to put with her. And then I told Betsy and Alex [Hitt]. And when I got in the car to go home, Betsy had put three of the most beautiful bouquets that she had made up on the backseat of the car. And she said, ‘Carla, one is for you, one is for
the vet, and one is for Mary Smith.’

And since then, through the years—and that was in 2001—every year on the anniversary of Mary Smith’s death, which is June twenty-third, Doris and Keith have let me come out to their garden and pick a bouquet of roses at no charge for Mary Smith, in memory. So that’s why I say it’s like family.”

Listening to this story, one gets the sense that it is a narrative that Carla has repeated to herself and to others many times. It epitomizes and affirms her believe that, in the absence of any living relatives, the farmers are her family. Shuford also sees something of her childhood in their lifestyle, observing, “I’m sure part of it is nostalgic from growing up on a farm. But I would not be who I am, and I would not be as happy as I am, if I didn’t have the social relationship that I have with these farmers.”

April 21, 2012, was Carla Shuford’s sixty-ninth birthday. At seven-fifteen that morning, she had finished her shopping and was returning to her car. “Happy Birthday, Carla!” said Betsy Hitt. “Who told you?” asked Shuford with a smile. “A little birdie.” Hitt presented Shuford with a bouquet of blue irises.

“Look what they gave me!” she exclaimed, showing me the Peregrine Farm irises and a cluster of pink roses in a repurposed metal soup can, a gift from her farmer-friends Doris and Keith Lewis. “I’m so touched.” The birthday flowers were the latest chapter in the story of Carla Shuford’s farmer-family. She will undoubtedly remember it long after they finish blooming.

---

138 Shuford oral history, August 24, 2011
Conclusion: If You Grow It, They Will Come

A Chapel Hill-Carrboro terroir has been constructed through narrative in the thirty-three years since the founding of the Carrboro Farmers’ Market. Chapter One situated the Carrboro Farmers’ Market in a century-long tradition of creative agricultural entrepreneurship in the North Carolina Piedmont by establishing the Market’s relationship to three historical moments: girls’ tomato clubs, home demonstration curb markets, and the Durham tobacco auctions. The five contemporary cases discussed in Chapter Two spoke to the themes of farmer-chef collaborations, agricultural heritage, authenticity, political activism, vendor-customer relationships, and personal health. These are among the major narratives exchanged at today’s Carrboro Farmers’ Market, but they are not the only stories to be found there. These narratives most strongly illustrate key concepts in southern folklore and food studies. However, there are other important stories for sale at the market, including those about public health, food access (especially through the Farmer FoodShare program), agricultural politics (such as the advantages, disadvantages, and costs of organic or biodynamic certification), and the social cachet of consuming local brands. This conclusion briefly explores where the Market is heading and the implications of these trajectories. The thesis ends with suggestions for further research on the topic.

Currently, the world of southern food is marked by two narrative arcs, both of which are on display and for sale at the Carrboro Farmers’ Market. The first trend is an embrace of globally inflected flavors, ingredients, and techniques. The second is the rediscovery and preservation of heirloom—or historically important—southern crops, many of which were on the brink of disappearance before a group of passionate seed-savers, chefs, and culinary
historians came to their rescue in recent years.\textsuperscript{139} Though some chefs, farmers, and consumers identify with one narrative more than the other, they are rarely in open competition with each other. In fact, narratives of the global and the historical are sometimes embraced at a single restaurant or farmers’ market stand, resulting in a fascinating—and often delicious—display of southern culinary syncretism. Michael Brinkley offers bok choy next to collard greens at the Brinkley Farms stand, and his meat cooler holds southern-style breakfast sausage like his grandfather used to make as well as chorizo, a sausage that originated in Spain and is also found in Mexican cuisine. Could he have learned about chorizo from his H2A guest workers, some of whom have come to Brinkley Farms from Mexico for more than a dozen seasons?\textsuperscript{140}

Chefs, farmers, and customers alike note that one of the biggest changes the Market has undergone since its inception is its increased “sophistication.”\textsuperscript{141} A much wider variety of produce is sold today than in the Market’s early days, when Alex Hitt described the offerings as “‘maters, taters, and beans.”\textsuperscript{142} Several farmers note the increased willingness of customers to try new products.\textsuperscript{143} Says Bill Smith, “This climate is good for lots of things, but many of them weren’t traditionally grown [here]. But they could have been. So—fennel comes to mind...a variety of peppers.... Celery root, chicories, endives, radicchio. When people

\textsuperscript{139}In recent years Glenn Roberts and David Shields of Anson Mills heirloom grains in South Carolina have effectively recreated Carolina Gold, an antebellum strain of rice that was integral to Lowcountry cuisine. Sean Brock of the restaurants Husk and McCrady’s in Charleston is among the nationally renowned southern chefs pushing for the revival of this and other heritage crops that were once staples of the region’s everyday diet.

\textsuperscript{140}Michael Brinkley oral history

\textsuperscript{141}This term popped up in numerous oral histories and informal interviews with Market vendors and patrons, including Ken Dawson, Bill Dow, Bill Friday, and Bill Smith.

\textsuperscript{142}Hitt oral history, August 23, 2011

\textsuperscript{143}Or old things that are new to them. For example, farm families in North Carolina once used every part of the hog “but the squeal,” as the saying goes. In recent decades, however, consumers gravitated toward packaged supermarket cuts such as loins and chops. In the last couple of years, says Eliza MacLean of Cane Creek Farm, she has seen an increased demand for offal-type cuts and organ meats.
became aware of it, then they would try to grow it. And then people would buy it. Now people will buy anything, if you can make it work.”144

Ben Barker is one of the chefs who delights in the availability of both “gourmet” and “old-fashioned” produce at the Carrboro Farmers’ Market. The Market allows Barker to access esoteric produce when he needs it, but he also delights in expressing his own heritage and educating diners through his interpretations of traditional North Carolina ingredients. He explains,

“I think the other aspect of [the Carrboro Farmers’ Market] that I appreciate is that even with all the fava bean and white Hakurei turnip vegetable-of-the-moment things, there’s still some people who want to grow the old varieties. And that’s really important to me as someone who wants to be able to— one, still cook with those ingredients that mean Piedmont, North Carolina, to me. But also to be able to put them on the plate in front of customers. You know, with the diverse audience that we have at the restaurant, there are fewer and fewer people who may have been exposed to that. The vegetables that were on that table [at my grandparents’ house] that define the way I think about where I grew up and the food that I am built on are still available for me to get there. There was a period when it sort of tried to go away, and then fortunately there are other chefs and consumers like us who demanded that they come back. And so I’m grateful to be able to have those ingredients. You can get wonderful turnip and mustard greens to cook in the way that they’re supposed to be cooked. You can feel like you’re translating—or, I guess, channeling—your grandmother when you’re standing in front of that pot in a commercial kitchen. It’s good.”145

As a case in point, Magnolia Grill’s spring 2012 menu includes a spinach vichyssoise with marinated crab and pickled turnips. Barker described this dish as a “Peregrine Farm–inspired presentation,” explaining that the spinach and turnips were sourced from the Hitts.146 Vichyssoise is a creamy, French-style soup that can be served hot or cold and is generally made with leeks, potatoes, and onions. Here, Barker offers his own spin on a dish likely learned in culinary school. The spinach—though not as iconically southern as turnip, collard,

---

144Bill Smith, personal interview, April 2, 2012
145Barker oral history, July 10, 2011
146Ben Barker, e-mail correspondence, April 16, 2012
or mustard greens—is raised less than an hour’s drive from Magnolia Grill. And the pickled turnips are almost certainly a nod to Barker’s Piedmont upbringing, when he recalled that various types of pickles or pickle relish were always on the table at his grandparents’ house in Burlington.147

***

In countries such as France and Italy, terroir is codified by legal designations. Roquefort cheese, Cavaillon melons, and Bordeaux wines are examples of French goods sold under AOC designation, or appellation de origine controlée. In the United States, no such legal designations exist on a national scale. Richard McCarthy of the Crescent City Farmers’ Market in New Orleans, an influential consultant for farmers’ markets around the country, has suggested that the United States adopt legal designations to protect and promote products like Gulf shrimp, whose reputation has taken a hit from the recent disasters of Hurricane Katrina and the BP Gulf of Mexico Oil Spill. In North Carolina, however, both private and government-sponsored initiatives offer branding and marketing opportunities for locally grown products. “Goodness Grows in North Carolina” and “Got to Be NC Agriculture” are two marketing campaigns sponsored by the North Carolina Department of Agriculture.148

Since last year, a private group, Piedmont Grown, has offered independent certification for produce and value-added goods grown or produced in the counties it identifies as the North Carolina Piedmont.149 After completing an application and paying a fee, the farmer, artisan producer, market, or restaurant can affix the “Piedmont Grown” label

147 Barker oral history, July 10, 2011

148 Like many southerners, I didn’t realize I was one until I first left the region. At boarding school in Massachusetts, I hung a “Goodness Grows in North Carolina” poster in my dorm room.

149 www.piedmontgrown.org
to his or her goods. The brand is intended to attract consumers who want local products for reasons ranging from environmental consciousness to supporting local economies to acquiring the social cachet that comes with local consumption in upscale farmers’ markets and specialty stores. Vendors at the Carrboro Farmers’ Market have had mixed reactions to these campaigns. Abraham Palmer of Box Turtle Bakery is one of the small number of CFM vendors who participate in the Piedmont Grown program, while the Market as a whole has chosen not to become certified with Piedmont Grown.

At the risk of sounding too critical of Piedmont Grown, the program brands many of the narratives already exchanged with great success between farmers and consumers at the Carrboro Farmers’ Market. Most of the Carrboro Farmers’ Market vendors consider their acceptance to the Market sufficient branding cachet. Because of its thirty-year history and its national reputation for high-quality produce and artisan goods, the application process for new vendors at the Carrboro Farmers’ Market is highly competitive. Abraham Palmer, a Duke graduate, compared it to a college application in lengthy, rigor, and stress-inducing potential. But the very existence of the Piedmont Grown group speaks to the economic value of the narratives exchanged at places like the Carrboro Farmers’ Market.

So in the end, what is a story worth? For Ben and Karen Barker, it is the centerpiece of their nationally recognized restaurant, which has a twenty-five-year track record of excellence in southern cuisine. For Michael Brinkley, it is a means of surviving the demise of the state’s historic tobacco cash crop and holding on to his family’s land. For Carla Shuford, it is the key to physical health and her personal happiness. The stories exchanged at the Carrboro Farmers’ Market are valued in different ways by farmers, chefs, and individual

---

150Abraham Palmer, Personal interview, November 2011.
customers. But for all, these narratives add value not only to their plates, but who they are as human beings. They affirm that locally grown southern food is about the taste of place and the story behind that taste. When we consume products from the Carrboro Farmers’ Market, we ingest memory, history, and the determination of the farmers, chefs, and customers of the Market for the past thirty-three years. Through their passion, their determination, and their stories, they have created the remarkable gift of terroir.

***

**Postcript**

On May 1, 2012, Ben and Karen Barker announced that they would be closing Magnolia Grill at the end of the month, citing their desire to spend more time with their aging parents, their children, and their grandchildren. Forty-eight hours later, dinner reservations were completely booked. The Barkers announced that they would take a much-needed rest after closing the restaurant, but that they were not sure what they would do after that. They have said that they will not sell the restaurant. Dozens of Triangle chefs have been trained or inspired by the Barkers, but it is impossible to say who, if anyone, will fill their culinary shoes. Hopefully, the next generations of chefs and farmers will form the sort of collaborative relationship that the Barkers and the Hitts have enjoyed for the past twenty-five years.
Bibliography

Barker, Ben, and Barker, Karen. Oral history conducted by Kate Medley for the Southern Foodways Alliance, July 10, 2011.


Brinkley, Michael. Oral history conducted by Kate Medley for the Southern Foodways Alliance, July 19, 2011.


Clark, Kelly. Oral history conducted by Kate Medley for the Southern Foodways Alliance, May 8, 2011.


Dawson, Ken. Oral history conducted by Kate Medley for the Southern Foodways Alliance, June 19, 2011.


Dow, Bill. Oral history conducted by Ashley Young for the Southern Foodways Alliance, August 29, 2011.


Hanton, Wilma. Oral history conducted by Kate Medley for the Southern Foodways Alliance, July 3, 2011.


Hitt, Alex, and Hitt, Betsy. Oral history conducted by Kate Medley for the Southern Foodways Alliance, August 23, 2011.

Hughes, Stanley, and Leach, Linda. Oral history conducted by Kate Medley for the Southern Foodways Alliance, July 10, 2011.


MacLean, Eliza. Oral history conducted by Sara Camp Arnold for the Southern Foodways Alliance, September 13, 2011.

McGreger, April. Oral history conducted by Kate Medley for the Southern Foodways Alliance, May 15, 2011.


“Piedmont Grown.” [www.piedmontgrown.org](http://www.piedmontgrown.org)


“———. Personal Interview. Pittsboro, North Carolina, November 16, 2011.”


--------. Oral history conducted by Ashley Young for the Southern Foodways Alliance, August 29, 2011.


