

FUTURE OF THE RESTAURANT

An invitation to join us in Birmingham

BY JOHN T. EDGE

IT'S EARLY MORNING HERE AT Barnard Observatory. I stare at a pair of white boards, jammed with talk ideas and speaker names. Scribbled during an all-staff brainstorm, those boards are the bones of our Spring Symposium. When we gather in Birmingham on March 28, SFA aims to chart the future of the restaurant.

You noticed, no doubt, our choice to use the word "Southern" as a modifier for the word "restaurant." We're not quitting the South. SFA works from a base in the South to ask questions that are national in scope and impact. We believe that the South is an ideal place to host American dialogues about race, class, gender, and more. Especially in this moment, when our nation has begun to recognize that problems previously defined as Southern are, in fact and truth, American.

At 2020 events, SFA will ask, *Can the South leverage its tragic and triumphant histories to lead culturally, intellectually, morally?*

We focus on restaurants in Birmingham,

because, as David Beriss and David Sutton argue in *The Restaurants Book: Ethnographies of Where We Eat*, the restaurant is an "ideal postmodern institution." Study restaurants and you reckon with production, consumption, and destruction, as well as tribalism, nationalism, and globalism.

With those possibilities in mind, I recently spoke with twenty-plus SFA members about whom we should invite to present, what they should address, and what we should embrace and avoid. Those conversations challenged and inspired me. And those conversations bore fruit that will flower when we gather in Birmingham.

Staff interests and curiosities help drive SFA work. That's always been part of the pleasure. I can remember back in 2002 when SFA staffers and board members began to imagine our first barbecue symposium. As we talked, I looked around the table, gobsmacked that crowd of smart people saw the same promise in the lives and labors of pitmasters. In that moment, I felt like I was getting

away with something. In this moment, as we program a symposium on the future of the restaurant, I feel the same.

Most weekend mornings, I retreat to a tin shed in our Oxford backyard to read and write. For the last few months, I've been trying to figure out how to write a book about my relationship to restaurants and bars. When I talk to people about my book, I explain my backstory. As a boy, I began to make homes in restaurants: first at Old Clinton Bar-B-Q, just up the road. Later, over dim sum at Canton House in Atlanta. More recently, in Oxford, where I claimed a morning perch at the low counter that anchors Bottletree Bakery.

In stories told from the South and beyond, at tables heavy with good food and drink, along an arc that spans my childhood and today, I am trying to make meaning of our American search to make homes in

restaurants and bars, where we gather to eat and drink and belong. The SFA is on the same path. At a time when restaurants are barometers of cultures, incubators of communities, drivers of economies, and unique sites of inequities, we embrace those same burdens and promises.

As this journal goes to press, SFA has already booked some speakers, including Khushbu Shah, *Food & Wine* restaurant editor, and John Hall, Birmingham restaurateur and chef. And we have begun production on a documentary. Focused on the barbecue legacies of Roscoe Hall and Rodney Scott, that new film will debut that March day. By the time you read these words, all the speakers will be secured, that whiteboard will be wiped clean, and tickets will be on sale. SFA is excited to ask these future-tense questions. We're proud to tell these stories. Please join us in Birmingham. 🍷

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