



FROM THE CAR WINDOW, THE MISSISSIPPI DELTA CAN APPEAR **DESOLATE** FOR MILES. PANCAKE-FLAT FIELDS OF COTTON, CORN, AND SOYBEANS STRETCH CLEAR TO THE HORIZON WITHOUT A **FARMHOUSE** OR FARM ANIMAL IN SIGHT. EVERY BLIP ON THIS STARK STUDY OF SOIL AND SKY STANDS OUT: A **MURKY** BAYOU SHROUDED IN MOSS-DRAPEDED CEDAR, A HULKING PILE OF **WRECKED** AND **RUSTED** CARS, THE ROTTED REMAINS OF A LONG-ABANDONED SHACK.

EVENTUALLY THESE TWO-LANE BLACKTOPS LEAD YOU TO SOME DUSTY HARD-LUCK TOWN WITH BUILDINGS SO OLD AND **CRUMBLY** THEY APPEAR AS IF THEY MIGHT GO UP IN FLAMES ANY SECOND. YET CARS AND **TRUCKS** ARE PARKED OUT FRONT OF ONE OF THOSE SAD-LOOKING FAÇADES AND **PEOPLE ARE HEADING INSIDE.**

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: CRAWDAD'S RESTAURANT IN THE NEAR-GHOST TOWN OF MERIGOLD, MISS., IS AS FAMOUS FOR ITS TAXIDERMY AS ITS FRESH CRAWFISH IN SEASON. TEAMS AT THE ANNUAL MEMPHIS IN MAY WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP BARBECUE COOKING CONTEST LIKE TO HAVE FUN, BUT WHEN IT COMES TO TENDING THE PORK, THEY COULDN'T BE MORE SERIOUS. CUSTOMERS AT ABE'S BAR-B-Q IN CLARKSDALE LOVE THE HOMEMADE SAUCE SO MUCH THEY LIKE TO DOUSE THEIR CHIPS WITH IT AS WELL AS THE PORK.



TENTATIVELY

you follow suit. Through the door, you feel as if you've crashed a boisterous party where the beer and sweet tea are ice cold, the food made fresh and spiced right, and the music playing from a vintage jukebox upbeat. Social anxieties about being a stranger quickly subside when a server greets you with the warmth and enthusiasm of a long lost friend. Ask her for a recommendation and she will effuse about Miss So-and-So's magic touch with the turnip greens, the hot tamales handmade by a local legend, the pimento cheese everyone says is the best in the land, or the pulled pork barbecue smoked all day and slathered in Paw-Paw's barbecue sauce, its recipe known only to next of kin.

While you wait—and given the general languid pace of life in the Delta, you'd best be prepared to—you can pass the time by soaking up the sights and sounds around you. In most Delta establishments, every inch of wall space oozes with history: of the region, the community, the family who's owned the place for generations. Rare is the Delta restaurant that doesn't have at least one piece of taxidermy displayed in some prominent spot; Deltans of every age and gender anticipate the openings of dove hunting and deer hunting seasons with the eagerness of Thanksgiving and Christmas. Family photos, sports trophies, high school yearbook portraits, rusty artifacts turned into art, and yellowed newspaper clippings of hometown news events dominate the rest of the wall space. The buildings themselves, no matter how decrepit, are regarded with the affection of a living, breathing relative. Every crack in the wall, warp in a floorboard, and water spot on the ceiling has a story, and if you are curious to know it, just ask the owner or chef who's probably chitchatting with other customers in between trips to the kitchen and will soon be swinging by your table to greet you.

Before you depart, you will likely have exchanged portions of your life stories, and succumbed to your urge for that wedge of lemon icebox pie piled high with meringue that beckoned you from the glass case behind the counter. You drive away feeling a pants size or two larger than when you arrived, yet hungry for more details about the place you just left and the people you just met.

This is the excuse I give whenever I try to explain to friends why the culinary guidebook to the Delta I planned to knock out in about six months in 2009 turned into a four-year odyssey, with more trips to the Delta from my home in Decatur, Georgia, than I can count. Every plate lunch café, hot tamale stand, juke joint, tea room, homegrown bistro, community festival, and private function took me on an unexpected detour into this strange and storied floodplain that's so close to the state capital of Jack-



son, where I grew up, yet in so many ways a world apart.

I first set foot in the Delta when I was a freshman at Ole Miss and my boyfriend brought me home to meet his family in the cotton town of Greenwood. That's where I first tasted pompano—a delicate-fleshed fish served primarily near the Gulf where it is caught, a few hundred miles downriver from Greenwood.

Some thirty years later, I would happily learn that the restaurant

BLUES TRAVELERS WOULDN'T THINK OF LEAVING THE DELTA WITHOUT A VISIT TO ABE'S BAR-B-Q IN CLARKSDALE, A TRADITION THAT BEGAN WITH LEBANESE IMMIGRANTS.

OPPOSITE (TOP TO BOTTOM): LUSCO'S IN GREENWOOD IS ONE OF THE SOUTH'S OLDEST AND MOST BELOVED DINING INSTITUTIONS, WHERE THE POMPANO RECIPE AND PRIVATE CURTAINED BOOTHS HAVE BEEN FIXTURES SINCE PROHIBITION. MISSISSIPPI HOT TAMALES CAN BE FOUND IN CAFES, MOM AND POP GROCERY STORES, AND TAKE-OUT STANDS THROUGHOUT THE DELTA DOWN TO VICKSBURG (LIKE THESE FROM SOLLY'S).



where I had that pompano—Lusco’s—still broils it in the tangy butter sauce made according to the same secret recipe they’ve followed since Prohibition. And better yet, they still serve it, along with wondrous steaks and a roster of Italian-flavored specialties, in private curtained rooms—a throwback to the days when Papa Lusco sold his homemade hooch to cotton planters who knew the secret password to enter. Sometimes they would arrive after a steamboat trip to New Orleans bearing fresh Gulf ingredients they couldn’t get at home and ask the Lusco wives to prepare it for them while they drank, gambled, and conducted their private affairs. That’s how pompano became a fixture on the menu once alcohol became legal and the grocery store morphed into a restaurant with private rooms for every customer.

The mercantile-turned-restaurant just celebrated its eightieth anniversary this year and remains a testament to the Delta’s dining culture, which stands strong even as much of the rest of the region crumbles around it. Lusco’s is one of the Delta’s most famous eat-

EVERY CRACK IN THE WALL, WARP IN A FLOORBOARD, AND WATER SPOT ON THE CEILING HAS A STORY.

ing institutions that can make this claim, but there are dozens of other representatives in nearly every town between Memphis and Vicksburg, where the Delta officially begins and ends. Bordered by the Mississippi River to the west and a ridgeline of bluffs to the east, the land that birthed the blues has never had it easy. Scars left by war, floods, killer mosquitoes, racial strife, boll weevil blight, and far more economic busts than booms run deep. Yet to those whose heritage is bound by this distinct geography, it is home, and their love for it—and each other—is palpable in the places where they gather to eat and drink. They are enthusiastic cooks who take pride in what they make and love to share it—and their stories—with people they’ve known forever, and those they’ve just met.

This is what I savor most about my journeys into the Delta. And why I keep looking for excuses to return for yet another helping.



(FROM TOP): THE OPENING OF HUNTING SEASON IS A GREAT EXCUSE FOR DELTANS TO THROW A BIG PLANTATION-STYLE PARTY. HAND-PAINTED SIGNS AT YAZOO MARKET IN YAZOO CITY. LARRY’S FISH HOUSE IN ITTA BENA IS RUN BY A FAMILY OF FARMERS WHO SERVE CATFISH MULTIPLE WAYS.

OPPOSITE (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT): BLUESMEN LIKE PAT THOMAS CAN OFTEN BE FOUND PLAYING IN RESTAURANTS. HUNTERS OFTEN GATHER FOR HEARTY COUNTRY-STYLE BREAKFASTS SERVED AT HUNTING LODGES LIKE THIS ONE IN MERIGOLD. THE SENATOR’S PLACE IN CLEVELAND SERVES MADE-FROM-SCRATCH SOUL FOOD, INCLUDING THESE JUST-MIXED HUSH PUPPIES STRAIGHT FROM THE FRYER. OLD FAMILY AND HIGH SCHOOL PHOTOS ARE COMMON DÉCOR AT MANY EATERIES INCLUDING PEA SOUP’S LOTT-A-FREEZE IN INDIANOLA. LOCALS AND VISITORS CAN PARTY TO AUTHENTIC BLUES AT CLARKSDALE’S GROUND ZERO BLUES CLUB CO-OWNED BY MORGAN FREEMAN. PEPPER VINEGAR SAUCE AND TOOTHPICKS ARE CLASSIC TABLE ADORNMENTS IN DELTA CAFES. REGULARS OF THE CRYSTAL GRILL IN GREENWOOD KNOW TO SAVE ROOM FOR THE MILE-HIGH MERINGUE PIES AND OTHER DESSERTS.



Ped Soup's LOTT-A-FREEZE

