

Super Secret
Eating Clubs

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by John E.
Bradley




Back to the Land

Lessons from the South's Smartest Farm



Roy Blount, Jr., on Gardening Naked



43 Guests, One Table

On a Saturday night, another Dai Due supper club dinner comes together in Austin. The club's name comes from a Latin phrase meaning, "From the two kingdoms of nature, choose food with care."

Secret Suppers

A growing number of daring chefs and adventurous foodies have reignited the old Southern tradition of secret supper clubs. Eating out may never be the same

BY SANDY LANG

PHOTOGRAPHS BY PETER FRANK EDWARDS

The Plates

of creamed kale and fried rabbit were going fast, passed from person to person down one long table set in a Texas pecan grove. It was a sultry evening on a four-acre urban farm in east Austin, where forty-three people sat in mismatched chairs for a family-

style dinner of eight courses in the lamp-light. An old door turned over on sawhorses was the prep table, and Jesse Griffiths, our host and chef, cooked mostly at a table-height iron grill with a bottom tray that—by consensus of several supper guests—was once a feed trough. The fryer, a large cooking pot over a portable propane flame, was behind him. And the whole setup was under the porch roof of a farm shed. He'd been cooking like that for hours, handing plates as soon as they were ready to his small crew, including his wife, Tamara Mayfield, who wore an embroidered summer dress, her brown hair in pigtails. A few yards from the long table, he cooked up pan-fried red peppers as big and sweet as strawberries, homemade jalapeño sausages, and smoky Gulf shrimp wrapped in grilled allspice leaves—all Texas ingredients.

This was a food-loving crowd, and they were eating it up. During the cocktail hour and between courses, people would often amble over to check out the cooking. As he turned quail over hot oak coals, Griffiths told stories: He told about the time he worked two weeks at a restaurant in Mexico that served only spit-roasted goat, turned in a coal-fired pit in the floor. Another time he caught the six pigeons he needed for a squab dinner by using some string, a box tilted up with a stick, and some chicken feed. Then there was Loncito, a lamb rancher, who talked of hosting long weekends at a South Texas hunting camp with two kitchens, where everyone takes turns cooking. A woman from the corporate offices of Whole Foods was there, of course. (Austin is the chain's headquarters.)

The dinner that night was one put on by a two-year-old supper club in Austin, part of the now-simmering supper club scene in the South. As with many of the other secret-public grassroots clubs, Jesse and

Tamara had started theirs with a small idea—to have one dinner on one night, inviting people to slow down for a few hours of good food and wine. More than two years later, the couple is still often cooking for a crowd on Saturday nights. And this is not just happening in Austin. In the Carolinas and Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Texas, and more, food-minded strangers are gathering at long tables to meet others and eat well. Operating outside the realm of official restaurants, this new wave of Southern supper clubs has sprung up in just the past two to three years. Upstarts in the Northwest, Midwest, California, and New York take earliest claim for such dinners, sometimes describing the meals in terms of a social movement, or even a revolution.

Supper Club History

The South, though, has a tradition of secret supper clubs, of gathering around food for food's sake. At clandestine gatherings of the Hot and Hot Fish Club in the early 1800s, some thirty to forty landowners (and at least one South Carolina governor) would meet on fishing ground hummocks



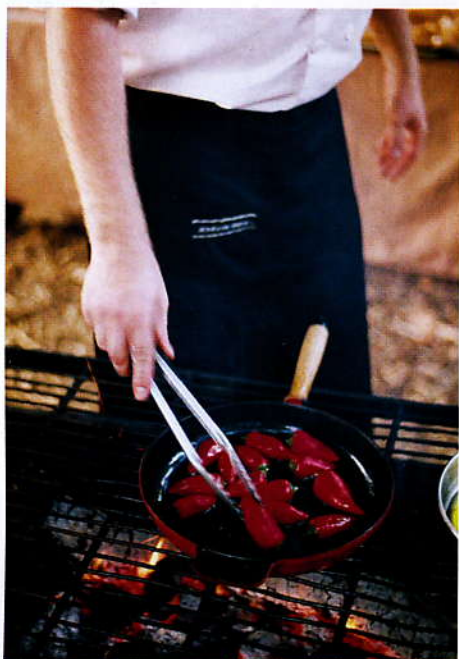
around Pawleys Island and Murrells Inlet. The story goes that the men would fish all morning and then cook the catch for a dinner of at least two courses, the second always better than the first—making it hot and hot. The club was “dedicated to epicurean pursuits,” and besides fish, everyone was required to bring champagne and brandy to share. I often heard of this fish and drink lore while growing up near Murrells Inlet, and I thought of it again while going to a granddaddy of today's supper clubs, this one held at John Henry Whitmire's house on the Waccamaw River, a few miles inland of Pawleys Island. Organized by Outstanding in the Field and chef Jim Denevan—who since 1999 has hosted dinners all over the country, with fans following along as if it's a band tour—the event was sold-out four months before the exact location was announced. And once there, more than 150 guests passed platters of local-caught wahoo along a looping line of tables at the edge of the old tidal rice impoundments.

These onetime dinners keep popping up in the South. In Athens, Georgia, there's a group of guys in their late twenties to mid-thirties—and now one woman—who cook together most Saturday nights in a century-old house downtown, with space to invite a couple dozen people to dinner. So they do. The supper club operates fairly underground; it started back in the spring of 2007 when four friends got together one Sunday to cook a four-course dinner. (Two of the men say they “aren't chefs at all, but love food...to talk about it and cook it,” and two had already worked in kitchens of some of Athens' best restaurants like Farm 255, the Grit, and the Five and Ten.) From that beginning, the Four Coursemen have filled their table several nights a month by inviting friends, and friends of friends. It's been a pretty popular gig, and to help, the group of mostly University of Georgia grads have added a wine expert and another experienced chef, and have started collecting a donation of forty-five dollars or more. (At first they'd had “a loose donation system” and were left with lots of out-of-pocket expenses.) One of the Four Coursemen founders is a Web site designer in “real life” and has started a simple site for the club that lists no location address (that's given once you're invited to attend), and only the organizers' and chefs' first names,

Big Night Out

Dai Due founders
Tamara Mayfield and
Jesse Griffiths do most
of the cooking and
organizing. Opposite:
the fried rabbit, which
disappeared fast.





Clockwise from top left: A member of the Dai Due crew serves up sweet red peppers; musicians Stanley Smith and Laura Freeman play jazz and western swing by the lettuce rows; Chef Jim Denevan hosts an Outstanding in the Field dinner in Pawleys Island, South Carolina; a lemongrass and white-wine concoction in Austin. Opposite: Tamara Mayfield greets a guest she knows from dinners past.

along with menus that are deep with food experimentation and local ingredients... celery root soup, crisped pork belly, beet gnocchi with boar sausage, boiled peanut ice cream. Every menu is for one night only, and not repeated. One of the founders explains, "This is about trusting the chef... it's not like at a restaurant where you go in and say, 'Here's what I want.' All we do is say, 'This is what we're cooking this week. Would you like to come over?'"

Similarly, in Charleston, South Carolina, a group called Guerrilla Cuisine has coordinated "experiments in collaborative dining" since the fall of 2007—in private homes downtown and on neighboring islands, in empty warehouses, and at the local muscadine vineyard. There's always art and music at the dinners, even a between-course skit one night that involved penciled-in mustaches and canned sardines. The founder, who goes by Jimihatt

A Seat at the Table

Ranging from semisecret to public, each supper club has its own method for inviting guests. The costs and donations vary, with some including wine, and others with brown-bag traditions. For more info, check out the following Web sites:

Dai Due
Austin, TX
daidueaustin.com

The Four Coursemen
Athens, GA
thefourcoursemen.com

Guerrilla Cuisine
Charleston, SC
guerrillacuisine.com

Outstanding in the Field
Various locations
outstandinginthefield.com

Supper Underground
Austin, TX
supperunderground.com

(a Guerrilla alias), is in his late thirties and has worked in some of Charleston's top kitchens. "We want to create one-night restaurants in places where there has never been one, and never would be," Jimihatt says. "People who eat with us are adventurous...they want to try something new and maybe be taken out of their comfort zone." To get there, an ever-changing lineup of Charleston chefs and sous-

chefs cook for Guerrilla Cuisine, preparing everything from seafood and game, to a macrobiotic menu (one of the few dinners that didn't sell out immediately), to eight courses of Spam recipes. "This is the South," he says. "So of course, pork is a huge part of what we do."

And in the supper club hotbed of Austin, thirty-two-year-old Hannah Calvert founded Supper Underground back in 2006. Over cocktails she explained how the club started, that she's a corporate consultant who's "obsessed with food" and put on the first two dinners herself—serving more than twenty guests—before she invited her friend Tasso Ziebarth to help out. (Also in his early thirties, Ziebarth has worked in the Austin restaurant scene for years.) Since then, more than seven hundred people have signed up to receive Supper Underground's e-mail notices about the dinner parties, which are held on porches, in backyards, and in dining rooms around Austin. The monthly four-course meals are announced online on the Monday before a Saturday night event. People have twenty-four hours to accept, and from the responses, Calvert and Ziebarth create a thirty-person guest list. I mentioned to Calvert about meeting a woman who said she'd been trying to reserve a seat with Supper Underground for five months. "Yes," Calvert said, smiling knowingly. "It can be tough for people to get in." ☺

