



Amelia Saltsman/

“So much of what I know about cooking, I learned just chatting across the stand at farmers’ markets,” says Saltsman, a Los Angeles-based cookbook author. The Santa Monica Farmers’ Market has been like a second home to Saltsman for more than 22 years, and she has dedicated cooking classes, her local television show, and her cookbook, *The Santa Monica Farmers’ Market Cookbook*, to its farmers. “They really care about connecting with the shoppers, and our food wouldn’t be the same if it weren’t for their passion,” she says. **AT THE MARKET: CUCUMBERS, page 74**

Ture Lillegraven/

It’s important for photographers to engage their subjects, and, luckily, Lillegraven has a way with people. In a picture for *GQ*, he caught Pixar animator Brad Bird playing air hockey against a giant plastic character from *The Incredibles*. In another, for *Entertainment Weekly*, he shot hip-hopper Lupe Fiasco gnawing on the side of a massive beat box. “Famous people usually have a catalog of poses. You have to give them something to do or catch them in between poses to get the best stuff.” The South Dakota native currently resides in Los Angeles. **STARTERS: Q&A, page 42**

Maria Helm Sinskey/

Sinskey has shifted gears since her days as the celebrated chef of San Francisco’s PlumpJack Café. She’s still making great food, but now it’s as culinary director of Robert Sinskey Vineyards—a winery run by her husband—which produces wine from organic and biodynamic grapes. The chef also keeps busy raising two daughters, writing a cookbook for Williams-Sonoma, and caring for sheep and chickens on the family’s farm in Napa. Incidentally, Lexi, eight, and Ella, nine, are the real achievers in the Sinskey family: The girls’ egg business, called Two Napa Chicks, is a runaway hit at their school. **THE GARDEN PARTY, page 124**

Sara Foster/

Foster’s Market, in Durham, North Carolina, was conceived as a specialty grocery store with some high-quality takeout food. “I never wanted to own a restaurant,” says Foster. But when regulars started crowding the tables, enjoying her food on site, she added a café to the country market she had opened in 1990. “I like to have fresh coffee roasting right when you walk in, and everything overflowing, spilling off the shelves, in baskets on the floor,” she says. The atmosphere proved conducive to more than just shopping. With a second location in Chapel Hill, the markets are among the Triangle’s most popular spots for a quick bite. **PASTA IN A NEW LIGHT, page 108**

Liz Welch/

An award-winning investigative journalist, Welch has a knack for finding a story—and a good meal along the way. When it came to researching this month’s piece on the Mississippi Delta, the New York-based writer had a head start. “In my 20s, I was a teacher in Mississippi,” she says. “That’s when I fell in love with cornmeal-crusted catfish and Delta fudge pie. That meal was my reward for getting through another week of teaching high-school English in Yazoo City.” **MISSISSIPPI FOODIE ROAD TRIP, page 116**



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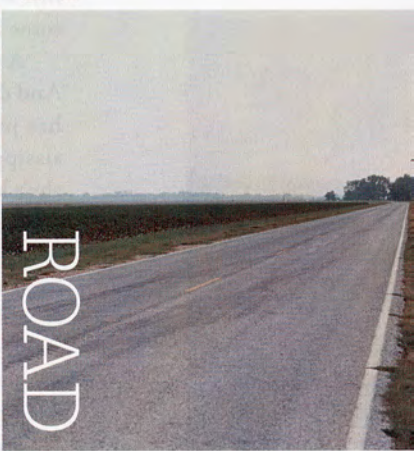
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AND HUNDREDS OF MILES OF HIGHWAY.
IT ALL ADDS UP TO AN UNFORGETTABLE
ROAD TRIP THROUGH THE DELICIOUS
BACK ROADS OF THE MISSISSIPPI DELTA.

BY LIZ WELCH / PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOÃO CANZIANI

DRIDERS • REG LG	
BEANS	1 59 1 79
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CHEESE FRY	4 39
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MISSISSIPPI **FOODIE**



ROAD TRIP

■ ABE DAVIS
AT ABE'S
BAR-B-Q IN
CLARKSDALE.

I KNOW I'D RATHER HAVE A GOOD HONEST FRIED ONION RING FEEL TO MY BOOKS THAN SOME KIND OF OLD FANCY-ANTSY PÂTÉ DE FOIE GRAS FEEL, WHICH ONLY HAS LIVER IN IT. I THINK WE IN THE SOUTH KNOW WHAT I MEAN."

DAY 1 / The southern author Roy Blount, Jr., wrote the above inscription on a poster that hangs on the wall at Hal & Mal's, the 1920s freight-depot-turned-restaurant in Jackson, Mississippi, where my five-day Delta foodie road trip begins. Martha Foose, executive chef at The Viking Cooking School, based in Greenwood, Mississippi, and author of the cookbook *Screen Doors and Sweet Tea*, is waiting for me at the bar. "Hey, gal," she hollers

in that fast-paced southern way where every sentence sounds like a punch line will follow. "I hope you packed some Zantac and Clearasil!"

A voice deadpans from behind: "And drawstring pants!" Lynda Posey has just arrived from Laurel, Mississippi, 90 minutes south, where she's known for her cooking classes at the Commerce Street Market and as actress Parker Posey's mom. Both Southerners and chefs, they have agreed to travel with me in search of the Delta's finest food. And I already sense that much of it will have a "deep-fried onion ring feel" to it.

We start at Hal & Mal's, where Martha's photo hangs alongside those of B. B. King, Emmylou Harris, and Willie Morris, all of whom have eaten

here. Martha was also a waitress here back in 1988 and has been coming back ever since. Hal, brother to onetime front man Mal, is the chef and well known for his soup. We begin with gumbo, an ode to his Aunt Myrtis, who trapped crabs from her houseboat. It arrives teeming with crabmeat, fat shrimp, and smoky chunks of andouille sausage. The oyster bisque is velvety-smooth, while the grilled bacon and pimiento cheese sandwich packs a punch: Diced jalapeño pepper gives the sharp cheddar, mayonnaise, and pimiento spread a spicy twist.

Full-bellied, we head north toward Satartia. On State Highway 433, the Delta begins to unfurl: flat land forever carpeted with cotton fields, interrupted by an occasional bog where cypress trees rise out of the water, draped in Spanish moss like craggy monsters in loose-knit shawls.

We pass Yazoo City's Hines Broadlake Grocery, where you

can get pulled-pork sandwiches and smoked ribs for lunch, and drive to Louise to pick up some Hoover Sauce at Lee Hong Company. Former proprietor Hoover Lee, Chinese-born, grew up in this town of 300 people, where he was mayor from 1973 to 1997. "I'd bring barbecue sauce to fire department dinners," he says. "Soon enough, people started asking for my sauce." He sells mason jars and plastic quarts filled with his marinade, which gives meats and fish what he calls "that Cantonese roast-duck flavor."

Our next stop is Belzoni, the "catfish capital of the world"—60 percent of the nation's farm-raised catfish are produced in this area. Martha points out The Varsity, a '50s-era restaurant that still sells thick milk shakes, and then a roadside snow-cone stand that doubles as a gravestone purveyor. "That," Martha says, "sums up the Delta!"

A mix of magical and macabre, the Delta is a land of juxtapositions. B. B. King was born here, as was Jim Henson, who imagined Kermit the Frog in the local creek. It's the poorest part of the United States, yet has produced some of our richest writers (Tennessee Williams, Eudora Welty), musicians (Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters), and desserts (Mississippi Delta fudge pie).

It's also home to the Viking Range Corporation, based in Greenwood, the former cotton capital of the world. In its heyday, Greenwood had its own cotton exchange and department stores that sold fur coats. Today, Viking sells stainless steel six-burner ranges, gourmet cooking classes, and some of Mississippi's finest food. At Delta Fresh Market, chef Taylor Bowen Rickett serves up fried green tomatoes with "comeback sauce"—think Thousand Island dressing with a chile-oil kick. The lamb shank, which she marinates for two days with cinnamon and cloves, is seared a perfect pink and placed on top of cheddar cheese grits. Stunning.

■ **THIS PAGE:** State Highway 7. **OPPOSITE:** Whole pompano, scored and grilled and served in a vinegary sauce at Lusco's in Greenwood. Lynda Posey at Lusco's. View of the Delta from State Highway 7 outside Belzoni.

DAY 2 / The day begins with a double latte at the Mockingbird, which boasts "the only espresso within 200 miles." Martha opened the bakery—now owned by Viking Hospitality Group—with her husband, Donald Bender, who makes breads, bagels, and biscuits daily. A few doors down, at The Mississippi Gift Company, I consider buying a Delta Delicacy caramel cake, made by local schoolteachers Adrian Tribble and Gwen Toomey, but opt for the Classic Cheese Straws and a jar of Sussie's Pecan Pepper Jelly.

Heading west on Highway 82, we stop at the Indianola Pecan House to sample an array of flavored pecans, from chocolate-dipped to cinnamon-roasted or rosemary-dusted. By now it's lunchtime, and The Crown Restaurant is packed. I order Catfish Allison, which is baked in a mayonnaise-butter-Parmesan crust, sprinkled with Tabasco, and broiled a smoky brown. Lynda gets the poached catfish salad, dressed with a



light mayonnaise, which leaves her more room for the pie buffet. Unable to choose among the Mississippi Delta fudge, coconut macaroon, and lemon chess pies, we have a sliver of each.

Our dinner reservation is at Lusco's back in Greenwood, which has been run by the same family for four generations. The restaurant was once a speakeasy; dingy floral curtains still line the long hallway to conceal individual dining rooms, each equipped with a service bell, left over from Prohibition days, when Charles Lusco sold moonshine. These days, you bring your own liquor or wine (go to The Delta Cellar). We buzz the waiter only to ask for more broiled shrimp, which are bathed in a tangy Worcestershire-based sauce and served with slices of garlic toast to sop up every last drop. Lusco's is famous for its steaks and onion rings, but I opt for the pompano, presented whole and perfectly charred and served with a fluffy spinach soufflé.

DAY 3 / I start with a four-mile run on Greenwood's Money Road past Little Zion Missionary Baptist Church, one of the three sites where blues musician Robert Johnson is allegedly buried—Quito and Morgan City have similar claims. The run is a precursor to the sausage-egg biscuit at Mattie's Place. By the time I get to her soul-food spot, Mattie Smith is already working on her buffet lunch—fried chicken, turnip greens, yams, and black-eyed peas. Lynda and I also split a fried chicken breast, and thus begins our day of fried food.

We head to Leland and pull into Fratesi Brothers Grocery, whose window signage claims that both ammunition and crawfish are sold there. The place is packed with craggy-faced farmers, their baseball hats perched high on their heads like tiaras. Mark Fratesi is the cook and hunter whose trophies decorate the place: An eight-point buck head hangs in one corner, a ten-pound bass in another. He serves a handmade-sausage-stuffed pork chop every day; on Saturdays, it's "chicken on a stick"—a chicken thigh or breast skewered with a bell pepper and an onion and then deep-fried. I order the "olive po' boy"—nuggets of mozzarella

stuffed with a black olive, then deep-fried and served on a hoagie with Mark's marinara sauce. Ridiculous and delicious.

Even though we have a 7:00 p.m. reservation at Doe's Eat Place in Greenville, we decide to scope out Sherman's Restaurant, a family-run establishment recommended by Lynda Posey's friend. Owner Charles Sherman is turning out excellent dishes, like lemon fish smothered in a light crawfish cream sauce. Lynda bites into a fried dill pickle and says it's the best she's ever eaten. The lemon icebox pie earns high scores, too—a tangy-sweet-tart custard offset by a graham cracker crust.

At Doe's, the owner's wife, "Sug" (short for "Sugar Doo") Signa, takes us to our table, where we start with broiled shrimp, plump and garlicky. Martha joins us, reminding us to save room for steak. We order a two-and-a-half pound large and a two-pound "small"—"for the ladies," our waitress explains.

The large steak arrives first: so big it hangs off each side of the plate, and so tender you can cut it with a butter knife. This explains the inscription on country singer Rebecca Lynn Howard's head shot, which is pinned to the kitchen wall: "To Doe's: Thanks for making me fat."

DAY 4 / I opt for a fruit plate at The Alluvian Hotel and Spa's breakfast buffet, where fluffy scrambled eggs, perfectly cooked bacon, biscuits, and a "scone of the day" are offered. Lynda heard that the best jelly doughnuts in the South can be found at Delta Donut, in Clarksdale, at the same Highway 49-Highway 61 crossroad where Robert Johnson allegedly sold his soul to the devil.

The doughnut shop is closed, alas, and I am distraught. But just down the road, the Lebanese diner Chamoun's Rest Haven lifts my spirits. Chafik and Louise Chamoun emigrated to Clarksdale in 1954. Paula, our waitress and their daughter, explains, "My mama was 16 when she married my daddy—it was arranged, but it worked out." In more ways than one: Rest Haven's *kibbie* is considered a Clarksdale specialty—patties of spiced lean ground beef mixed with cracked wheat that can be eaten fried, baked, or raw. I order mine baked and stuffed with pine nuts and almonds; Lynda goes for fried and drizzled with hummus. We finish with a slice of Paula's homemade coconut pie, which is piled with three inches of frothy meringue and sprinkled with toasted coconut. One bite, and I forget all about the doughnuts.

There's lots to check out in Clarksdale: the Delta Blues Museum; Tennessee Williams's childhood home; and local folk art and an extensive blues collection at Cat Head Delta Blues & Folk Art. At Abe's Bar-B-Q, I pick up a bottle of Abe's barbecue sauce, from a family recipe dating back to 1924, which Abe uses on his ribs and pulled-pork sandwiches. His tamales—barbecued pork encased in a moist cornmeal crust, wrapped

▪ **OPPOSITE:** A barbecued pork sandwich and fried okra at Fratesi Brothers Grocery in Leland. Mississippi Delta fudge pie at The Crown Restaurant in Indianola. Tommie "T-Bone" Pruitt and the Rhythm Rockers at Ground Zero Blues Club in Clarksdale.



WHERE TO STAY

If you're looking for high-thread-count linens, wireless Internet, and a top-notch all-you-can-eat breakfast buffet, book at **THE ALLUVIAN HOTEL AND SPA**, Viking Hospitality Group's chic boutique hotel in downtown Greenwood. 318 Howard Street; 866-600-5201; thealluvian.com

For a more authentic Delta experience, **TALLAHATCHIE FLATS** consists of old shotgun shacks complete with kitchens and lovingly

outfitted in vintage furniture. 58458 County Road 518, Greenwood; 866-933-5287; tallahatchieflats.com

SHACK UP INN, on the old Hopson Plantation, consists of funky studio apartments, a perfect crash pad for blues lovers and just down the road from Abe's Bar-B-Q and Delta Donut. 001 Commissary Circle, off Highway 49, Clarksdale; 662-624-8329; shackupinn.com

and steamed in corn husks—are the best I've eaten on the trip.

Local celebrity Morgan Freeman opened Madidi with partner Bill Luckett so they'd have a nice place to eat whenever Morgan visited his home. We go for dinner, and it's upscale and elegant: The arugula salad is dressed with a simple sesame vinaigrette; the sea bass is seared, drizzled with roasted pumpkin sauce, and served on a bed of cauliflower hash. Double espressos get us to Ground Zero, Freeman's nearby blues club, which is hopping. As Martha points out, "Dancing your ass off is the best way to stay slim in the Delta."

DAY 5 / On our final day, Lynda and I head to Oxford—more hill country than Delta, but not to be missed. Martha meets us for breakfast at the Bottletree Bakery, where we nibble on crystallized-ginger scones and individual-size blackberry "humble pies."

Square Books, just down the road, has an entire William Faulkner section, appropriate since Rowan Oak, his home, is a ten-minute walk away. Another Mississippi native, Dan Latham, opened L&M's Kitchen and Salumeria after training with Mario

Batali. We order a sampling of his cured meats: Salami is cured with fennel and allspice; *guanciale* with sugar and thyme; pancetta with a local bay leaf; and the house bacon in brown sugar, salt, and pepper, making it both savory and sweet. Everything on the brunch menu is stellar, from the balsamic-drizzled sweet potato and currant bruschetta to the fluffy scrambled eggs that accompany the seared and pan-roasted quail stuffed with lemon zest risotto. It is the best breakfast yet.

■ **OPPOSITE:** Fratesi Brothers Grocery's fried okra, tater babies, and onion rings. Local celebrity Morgan Freeman on the porch of Ground Zero Blues Club in Clarksdale. Cotton fields outside Belzoni on State Highway 7.

As is our dinner, the last one of our trip. Oxford mayor and Square Books owner Richard Howorth recommended the Yocona River Inn, which is ten miles outside Oxford. He is waiting for us outside with his wife, Lisa, an art historian working on a novel. Six fluffy black puppies scamper around their feet, and Lisa points to a handwritten sign in the restaurant window: "Free puppy with slice of Key Lime Pie."

This cozy restaurant has wood-paneled walls and two glass cases that display original copies of Julia Child cookbooks. Lisa orders the steak, finished in a Burgundy, molasses, and sweet butter sauce, a dish the waiter claims "keeps the doors open and the lights on." One bite, and we understand why. I opt for the catfish, as I'd heard owner Paige Osborn was "the best fryer in Mississippi." Dipped in cornmeal and fried to crunchy perfection, the catfish remarkably maintains its delicate taste.

Though tempted, I decide against the Key lime pie. The puppies are cute, but my bag is already stuffed with Mississippi memorabilia. Besides, one more dessert, and I'd start lamenting that I hadn't packed drawstring pants. / ■

Liz Welch is a contributing writer for *Glamour*, *Real Simple*, and *Inc.*

COCONUT MERINGUE PIE

8 SERVINGS/ *From
Chamoun's Rest Haven
diner in Clarksdale.*

- 1 refrigerated pie crust (half of 15-ounce package), room temperature
- 6 tablespoons plus $\frac{3}{4}$ cup sugar
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup cornstarch
- 2 cups whole milk
- 5 large eggs, separated, room temperature
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup ($\frac{1}{2}$ stick) unsalted butter, cut into 4 pieces
- $1\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoons vanilla extract
- $1\frac{3}{4}$ cups sweetened flaked coconut, divided
- $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon cream of tartar

Preheat oven to 425°F. Unfold crust and press into 9-inch-diameter pie dish. Crimp edges. Pierce all over with fork. Bake until golden brown, piercing occasionally with fork if crust bubbles, about 12 minutes. Cool completely.

Whisk 6 tablespoons sugar and cornstarch in heavy medium saucepan. Whisk in milk and yolks. Add butter; whisk constantly over medium heat until custard begins to boil at edges. Remove from heat; whisk in vanilla. Pour custard into medium bowl; press plastic wrap directly onto surface to prevent skin from forming. Chill custard until cold, about 4 hours.

Sprinkle $\frac{3}{4}$ cup coconut over crust. Spoon custard over; smooth top. Sprinkle with $\frac{1}{4}$ cup coconut. Chill pie while preparing meringue.

Preheat oven to 425°F. Using electric mixer, beat egg whites and cream of tartar in large bowl until soft peaks form. Gradually beat in $\frac{1}{4}$ cup sugar, beating until stiff glossy peaks form. Spoon meringue over filling; spread all the way to edges to cover filling completely. Sprinkle remaining $\frac{1}{4}$ cup coconut over. Bake until meringue is golden brown in spots, about 12 minutes. Transfer to rack and cool. Chill pie at least 2 hours and up to 6 hours. Cut into wedges and serve.

LEMON ICEBOX PIE

8 SERVINGS/ *This sweet
lemon pie is from Sherman's
Restaurant in Greenville.*

- 6 whole graham crackers
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup ($\frac{1}{2}$ stick) unsalted butter, melted
- 18 vanilla wafer cookies
- 1 14-ounce can plus $\frac{2}{3}$ cup sweetened condensed milk
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup fresh lemon juice
- 3 large eggs, separated, room temperature
- 1 cup sugar, divided
- 2 tablespoons cornstarch
- $\frac{2}{3}$ cup water

Finely grind graham crackers in processor. Add melted butter and blend until moist crumbs form. Press crumbs onto bottom (not sides) of 9-inch-diameter glass pie dish. Arrange cookies, rounded side out and side by side, around sides of dish.

Preheat oven to 325°F. Whisk condensed milk, lemon juice, and yolks in medium bowl to blend. Let stand until thickened, about 15 minutes. Pour filling over crust. Bake pie 30 minutes.

While pie bakes, prepare meringue topping. Whisk $\frac{3}{5}$ cup sugar and cornstarch in heavy small saucepan. Gradually whisk in $\frac{2}{3}$ cup water. Bring to boil over medium-high heat, whisking frequently (mixture will thicken). Cool 10 minutes.

Using heavy-duty mixer, beat egg whites in large bowl until foamy. Gradually add $\frac{1}{5}$ cup sugar, beating until soft peaks form. Beat in warm thick cornstarch mixture 1 tablespoon at a time. Beat until meringue forms glossy peaks.

Spoon meringue over hot filling; spread all the way to edges to cover filling completely.

Increase oven temperature to 350°F. Bake pie until meringue is golden brown in spots, about 18 minutes. Cool completely, then cover with cake dome and refrigerate overnight.

Cut pie into wedges.