

# Recovering Rice

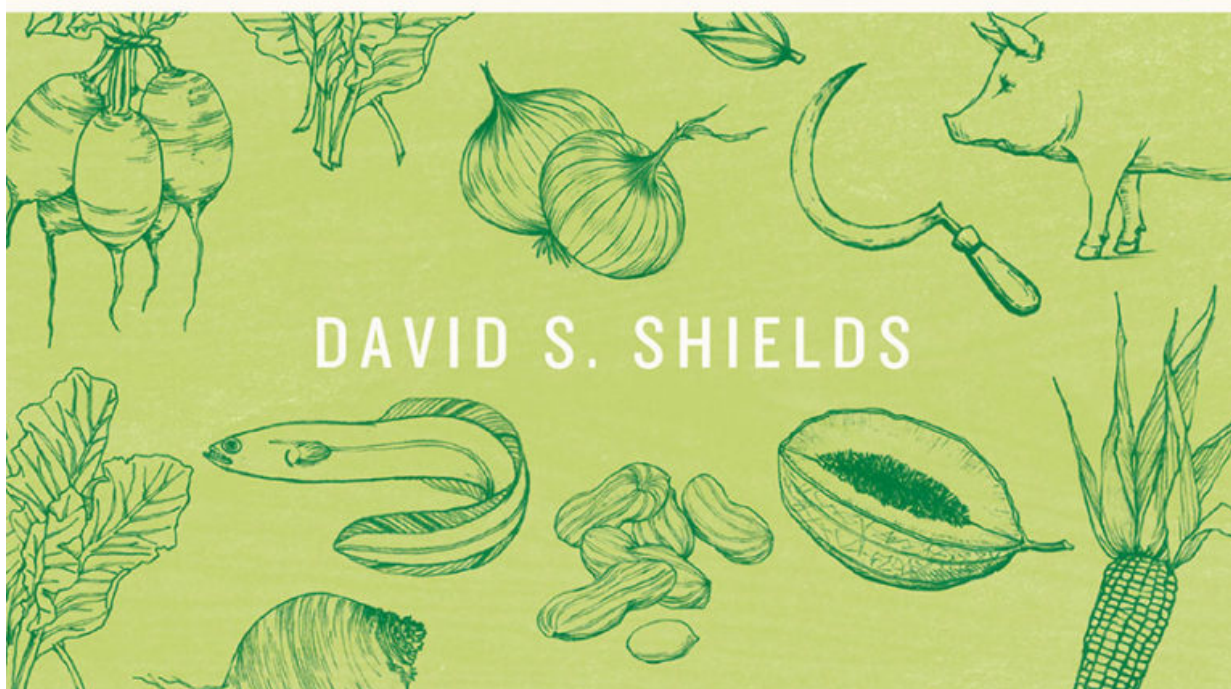


# SOUTHERN

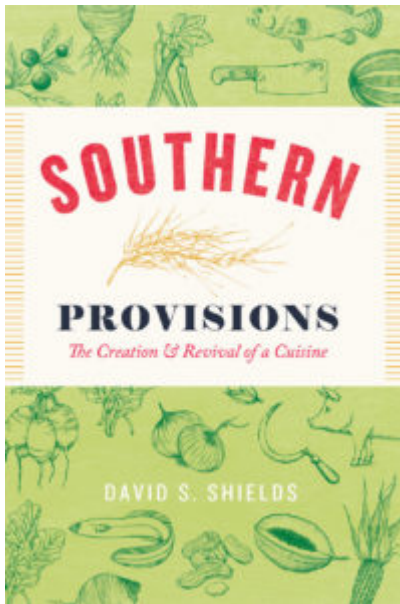


## PROVISIONS

*The Creation & Revival of a Cuisine*



DAVID S. SHIELDS



David Shields, *Southern Provisions: The Creation and Revival of a Cuisine*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015. 416 pp., \$30.

*Southern Provisions* is a remarkable piece of scholarship from a remarkable scholar. David Shields's name is well known to readers of *Common-Place* for his foundational work on early American *belles-lettres*, not to mention his pivotal role in founding the Society of Early Americanists. This monograph on southern foodways offers a synthesis of these twin passions for archival research and social organization.

*Southern Provisions* stretches the literal definition of a monograph in the variety of its ambitions. In its larger conceptions, *Southern Provisions* has more in common with *Nature's Metropolis* (1992), William Cronon's extensive study of the links between Chicago and its rural hinterlands, than it does with foodways scholarship that is focused on a given dish, crop, or region. The book offers three distinct sections, framed around cooking, selling, and planting, each of which could stand alone. The first section, "Cooking in The South," details several pinnacles of antebellum southern gastronomy—nineteenth-century fine dining in New Orleans restaurants; the Maryland Club Feast; catering in Charleston; and a more detailed account of a single meal, at the Jockey Club Banquet of February 1, 1860. This section closes with a coda detailing humbler fare, titled "Possum in Wetumpka." The middle section, "Selling," details the evolution of the Charleston City Market from 1810 to 1860, the pivotal role an African American ex-Confederate gunrunner played in developing Charleston's seafood industry, the New York market for southern provisions, and truck farming.

The final section, "Planting in the Lowcountry," treats specific commodities: Carolina Gold rice, sugar, sorghum, cooking oils, peanuts and peanut oil, and citrus. One of the very salient appeals of this section is that in several cases, the reader can buy, cook, and eat the commodities Shields describes recovering. This history of commodities, considered together, offers an inspiring alternative to the more narrowly focused commodity histories—Mark

Kurlansky's *Cod* (1997), or Larry Zuckerman's *Potato* (1999)—that have populated nonfiction bestseller lists over the last several years.

Across these three sections, Shields works with simultaneous concern for the past and future. There is as much detail as almost anyone could want about the history of southern crops and dishes—the chart detailing sources for South Carolina garden seeds stretches for eight pages (41-49), and represents untold hours of archival work. Shields is most eloquent, however, on efforts to promote the return of several of these vanished crops, most notably Carolina Gold rice. In concert with Glenn Roberts, the proprietor of Anson Mills, and scientists Anna McClung and Gurdev Khush, among others, Shields worked to reintroduce the nearly extinct variety of rice that was the foundation of the Carolina rice kitchen celebrated in Karen Hess's 1992 book of the same name. This work of recuperation is outside the ambit of most early American scholars, and, not surprisingly, these passages find Shields at his most persuasive. Describing the beginning of this quest, Shields explains, "I wanted to taste that lost variety, whose reputation remained so potent that it sold millions of dollars of anonymous white rice in the nation's groceries" (231).

Like the germplasm banks that provide some of the resources for this work of agricultural recovery, *Southern Provisions* contains the seeds of many books. There are crops, institutions, and cooks too numerous to name, all of which emerge as deserving of more extensive scholarship. (This is certainly the first book that made me want to read up on sorghum, for instance.) At the same time, the variety of tasks this book takes on makes it challenging, at times, to engage as a sustained narrative. Chronology works somewhat differently in each of the three sections, and determining exactly how each section relates to the other takes some effort. Geographic range and definition appear equally elastic. Shields's focus is mainly on South Carolina, except when his stories take him elsewhere. In like measure, his definition of "southern" (like any definition of "southern," really) will raise objections from partisans of the regions it excludes or neglects. Perhaps because of this capaciousness rather than despite it, *Southern Provisions*, much more than most academic books, is one that rewards dipping into, both for its historical insights and its compelling prose. It's rare to review a book for a journal and find oneself reading selections aloud to companions, but a sentence like "Conservation was a rich man's movement directed against the ambitions of laissez-faire profiteers from the wild" (99) is hard not to share.

*Southern Provisions* thus shows the many opportunities, and perhaps a few of the pitfalls, that food studies has to offer scholars and enthusiasts of early America. Food has the potential to forge links between the past and the present that resonate in the imaginations of the broader public with a general interest in early American culture. Shields traces many of these links in compelling fashion. The crop restoration projects Shields has promoted offer a kind of reemergence of the past that is impossible to imagine for other facets of early American culture. One cannot walk down King Street in Charleston as it was in 1870, but one can enjoy the same rice that those Charlestonians did.

At the same time, because food, and especially good food, lends itself to celebration, there is always a danger that food-oriented projects focused on recovering a southern past will inevitably offer a somewhat sanitized and cheerful version of that past. This is a cultural history of food, more than it is a social history of food, but in its focus on promoters and impresarios then and now, the immense labor that attends any agricultural work can be difficult to see in this account. It may in part be a function of the concurrent appearance of a number of high-profile monographs about slavery (notably Edward Baptist's *The Half Has Never Been Told* [2014]), but considering this is a book about the South both before and after slavery, it's surprising that there is not more of an effort to tease out the difference between the legal status of being a slave and the cultural status of being Black. In particular, a passing mention of free Black women in Charleston who owned slaves warrants a bit more explanation (114-115). To be sure, there are sketches of some remarkable Black lives, notably Charles C. Williams, the Black Confederate gunrunner who then used his intimate knowledge of Carolina's coastal waters to revamp Charleston's seafood industry during Reconstruction, and then used that experience to become a leading ichthyological expert. That said, the foodways Shields documents, both before and after slavery, relied upon social relations of inequality and exploitation that seem missing from his account. Then or now, on a plantation or at a farm-to-table restaurant where the server breathlessly details the provenance of your pork chop, part of the art of fine dining consists in occluding the messy, dirty social relations that populate the road from the field to the plate.

In all, *Southern Provisions* is a wide-ranging and ambitious book, a remarkable achievement that tells the stories of remarkable achievements in which its author played a major role. While it is possible to imagine other books that might have been written from this same archive, we hope this is the beginning of a conversation with an array of voices chiming in. Academics, including early American academics, like to talk about the intervention a scholarly work makes. Usually, these interventions exist in an abstract and intellectual realm. While Shields will no doubt change how future writers think about southern foodways, he also details more concrete interventions. Thanks to the work that Shields has done himself, and the work of others he has promoted, the fruits of several of the historical recoveries he describes are available via Anson Mills and other vendors. The full impact of Shields's work comes in savoring interventions you can cook and eat.

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