

Unforgettable Fare: Nat Fuller's Feast at the University of South Carolina



With tornado warnings having been issued for the South Carolina midlands on the evening of Sunday, April 19, 2015, an air of uncertainty suddenly upended months of planning for Nat Fuller's Feast on the University of South Carolina's historic Horseshoe. McKissick Museum and its partner organizations—the Atlantic Institute, Columbia Luncheon Club, Columbia Urban League, Greater Columbia Community Relations Council, and USC's African American Studies Program and Institute for Southern Studies—had chosen this venerable, oak-shaded quadrangle at the heart of the campus as the feast site for several reasons. First, because the Horseshoe is encircled by a historically significant collection of slave-made structures that stand as a testament to the artisan and manual labor of enslaved Africans that continues to shape our lived experience of place. Second, because of its proximity to the museum and the juried contemporary art exhibit—*Crafting Civil (War) Conversations*—that had challenged artists to imagine and give form to Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream of a "table of brotherhood" where the sons of former slaves and former slave owners might sit together. And third, because of the role the Horseshoe had played during the Civil War as the site of an army hospital—a place where the wounded might be healed. What better site to pay homage to Nat Fuller's remarkably generous-spirited gesture of hospitality and healing within weeks of the Civil War's end?



1. Diners at Nat Fuller's Feast held at the University of South Carolina. Photo by C. Michael Bergen, courtesy of *The State* newspaper.

Ultimately, however, the inclement weather prevailed, and we had to move inside. After the cocktail reception at McKissick Museum—where guests sampled Fuller's signature mint juleps and celebrated the announcement of artworks from *Crafting Civil (War) Conversations* to be purchase for the museum's permanent collection—everyone made their way to McCutcheon House, one of the antebellum buildings facing the Horseshoe. There, rectangular tables were set in long rows as they likely would have been arranged at Fuller's establishment, and the best china available was elegantly presented with tasteful floral arrangements on each table.

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Once guests settled in, Dr. Carl Evans gave a non-denominational prayer. Then Khadijah Dennis—a USC junior and founding member of First Word Epiphany, an African American spoken word collective—performed a poem she composed for the occasion to conjure the spirit of what she imagined Fuller might have said to preface the meal he had invited guests to share.

Today, we end this war
But the truest battle lies ahead.

Today, I am wrapped in a warm environment of trust and sanctuary.
Hands intertwined with substance—
“rejoice and divide this among you.”
For this is of my heart, given for you.

The road we've traveled hasn't been easy, and neither is adversity.
Today marks promise.

We are the peace in the midst of rain.
A century ahead of time it feels like a dream.
In this moment, we are all the same, and we are the example.

The question should not be how we did it, but in that we did, we are.
“I say to you today, my friends, that in spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment, I still have a dream. We cannot walk alone.”

We sit in fulfillment of things foreshadowed to be hardships for our future generations. History will be his story more over told in hopes of shedding light into dark hearts.

There will be days that the sun decides against shining, laughter will be hard, grace difficult, freedom non existing for all of God's children, but still there is hope. Today, we sit in light of a dark hour, and in remembrance of our adversity.

This *meal* I present to you is of my heart, filled with gratitude. Take ye, feast of it.

At this point, a well-rehearsed wait staff entered with almost military precision to serve the first course—crab and cabbage cannelloni with lemon-parsley gelée and red pepper coulis. This light, delicately flavored course was followed by an earthier terrine de foies de volaille (chicken pâté) accompanied by green pea-mint puree, crispy bacon, citrus compote and chard potato bread.

For a moment, people paused their conversations for toasts by USC President Dr. Harris Pastides and Milton Kimpson Jr. speaking on behalf of his father, Dr. Milton Kimpson, who served as the first executive director of the Greater Columbia Community Relations Council. With much candor, Pastides used the occasion to reflect on the history of the university as it related to the history of slavery. Kimpson leavened his toast with humor as he suggested that perhaps not everyone present at the 1865 feast was in a celebratory mood.

Meanwhile, the champagne flowed and the food kept coming—all fueling feelings of goodwill. Manchester Farms quail stuffed with wild mushrooms and artichokes in a port wine sauce served with sweet potato-rutabaga gratin and braised wild greens inspired many a guest to express a desire especially for the potato recipe. Taste buds found delight in the palette-cleansing, red beetroot granité with tarragon syrup. Chef Corey Green finished his savory offerings by bringing us back to low country cuisine with roasted cobia, oyster risotto, and fried spinach in a grapefruit vinaigrette.



2. Dr. Carl Wells, director of USC's gospel choir, singing at USC's Nat Fuller's Feast. Photo by C. Michael Bergen, courtesy of *The State* newspaper.

Just as apple jelly cake was being served, Dr. Carl Wells, director of USC's gospel choir, regaled guests with a deep-voiced rendition of *Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me 'Round*, in which the song's protagonist pledges to "keep on a walkin', keep on a talkin', walkin' into freedom land." Needing very little prompting, guests then heartily joined Wells in singing *Let My People Go*.

The evening ended with Chef Green and his crew coming out from the kitchen to enjoy a standing ovation. As guests braced themselves to face the formidable weather and trip home, many remarked "until next time" or "until next year." The general feeling seemed to be that this was an experience well worth repeating—that Nat Fuller and his legacy should not be forgotten.

Crab and Cabbage Cannelloni

Lemon-parsley gelée, red pepper coulis

Terrine de Foies de Volaille

(Chicken pâté)

Green pea-mint puree, crispy bacon, citrus compote

Chard potato bread

Manchester Farms Quail

Stuffed with wild mushroom and artichoke

Sweet potato-rutabaga gratin and braised wild greens

Port wine sauce

Red Beetroot Granité

Brunoise of golden beet and tarragon syrup

Roasted Low Country Cobia

Oyster risotto, fried spinach, grapefruit vinaigrette

Apple Jelly Cake

Spiced cider reduction, caramelized apple rounds

Coconut mousse and crisp apple cookie

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