The Great Eaters of Georgia

Carson McCullers

After many years in Europe I visited my home state, Georgia. Until that time I did not realize that I was homesick, homesick for Georgia countryside, Georgia voices, Georgia ways. I wanted to go back and restore my contact with the state and see old friends. The lonely wail of the train whistle as it echoed through the mountains was familiar, dear. The countryside with the red gulches and isolated mountain farms spell home to me.

First I went to visit Lillian Smith, who lives on a remote mountain that used to be operated as a girl’s camp during the summer months. But the falls, winters, and springs are long in the mountains, and Lillian, with the assistance of Paula Snelling, founded the 

North Georgia Review. This little magazine sounded a modern liberalism in Georgia which her novel Strange Fruit and her later prose work furthered. Lill, like other Southerners, feels passionately about the problems of the Negro. Most Georgians do not agree with her, and often when her name is mentioned there is that strange area of silence.

She was talking with the cook when I arrived, and seasoning the curry we were to have for supper. There was a fire burning in the great stone fireplace, and the long window overlooked the mountains with the vivid leaves. The cook bewailed the fact that I had not come a month earlier because then “every leaf on the mountain was beautiful.” For now a rain had come and washed away some of the color. The cook has been in Lill’s family for some twenty years and feels a sort of responsibility about the beauty of the mountain.

Lill, Paula, and I sat before the fireplace drinking sour mash and water. This bourbon, I believe, is a native product of the Appalachian hills. Lill explained that many of the counties in this region are dry. When I wondered how people could live in a dry county and why they didn’t change the law, she explained it was “une petite combine” between the church and the bootleggers. It was good to be with Lill and Paula after years spent abroad. We discussed Georgia politics, personal finances, and mutual friends. For, as most writers, we both dislike to write
letters and, as most Georgians, we dearly love to know what is going on in the lives of our friends.

The supper table was lovely. There were white candles and exquisite linen, for when it comes to household things like linen, Lill is a great swell. She has dozens of antique banquet cloths with napkins as big as an ordinary tablecloth. The evening meal is always a big meal. Georgians eat big meals three times a day. I have never gotten over this orange-juice-and-coffee breakfast they have up North. A respectable Georgia breakfast means fish roe and grits or at least eggs or maybe country sausage. The biggest meal of the three is the noon meal, but supper is a respectable meal, too. For supper that night, along with the curry and rice, there were served hot biscuits which I miss when I am away from home. You can see that we Georgians are great eaters whether we realize it or not.

After two days with Lill, I went by bus to Augusta, and once the mountains were behind us I approached the real South—the plantation stretch of Georgia. The country is poor, and there are scenes of an archaic quality. A mule goes round and round grinding cane, and I remember sunny autumn days in my childhood when the children in the family would sit on the back porch chewing sugarcane—I remember the print of our teeth on the chewed cane. This is the time of year when children drink clear ground cane juice before it is boiled for syrup.

On country roads and highways in middle Georgia, the traveler is struck by an extraordinary number of lone chimneys, charred and desolate, standing in the fields. One still sees, from time to time, on the landscape, a man and a mule and a plow which used to be the prime economic unit in the South. The plowed fields are lavender in the late afternoon. One sees a gray shack of the peculiar silvery patina of old weathered wood that has never been painted, and the smoke comes from the chimney, shifting with the wind. One still sees the soft muted glow of lamplight through an open door. There is a privy and an old-fashioned iron wash pot in the backyard and a well in the front yard. There is nearly always a chinaberry tree in the yards of these rural houses, for the chinaberry tree was once widely cultivated to counteract miasma, and its sickly lavender flowers are seen everywhere in the spring.
I went to Augusta to visit with Dr. Hervey Cleckley and his wife, Louise. “Doc” is a psychiatrist and teacher at the medical school. He is a Georgian to the bone; when he went to England on a Rhodes Scholarship he nearly perished with homesickness, and he tells me he is even homesick when he goes as far as North Augusta, which is just the other side of town.

Visiting with Doc and Louise while I was there were their daughter and grandson, who is six. They have two white dogs which they feed surreptitiously under the table. It is a family house, and friends come to borrow badminton balls or some such thing and children play on the lawn. Louise, Doc, and I talked of the improvement in the understanding of racial problems and the migration from the rural cotton areas to the cities and towns.

We remembered also that Dr. Crawford Long was the first person to use ether in an operation. This was in 1842 when it was fashionable in Georgia to have “ether parties.” These odd-sounding affairs must have been like marijuana parties to the modern teenager but there was no social stigma attached, and my grandmother told me that, as a young lady, she often held ether parties for her young friends after they had ridden home from church and gathered for Sunday dinner. Dr. Long, noticing the strange absence of sensory feeling of the ether takers, proposed that a patient suffering from a tumor on the neck would take ether before the operation. The patient was willing, and the operation was performed.

In my mother’s day a child wore an asafetida bag around his neck to ward off colds and contagious diseases. Asafetida is the foulest-smelling substance. I suppose it makes good medical sense because one was not apt to go very near a person wearing an asafetida bag. So communicable diseases were not so easily passed around. In my day whenever a child was peaked the great remedy was a “course of medicine” that commenced with a dose of calomel, which was followed the next day by castor oil. There was a special castor-oil cup in the safe (the cupboards in Georgia used to be called safes), and this cup was invariably cracked—a repulsive vessel indeed.

It is nostalgic to go back to one’s hometown, remembering place and childhood events. It is emotionally disturbing, too.
I was sad when I saw that the old-timey Victorian house where I was born had been razed and rebuilt into a brick grocery store. The house we moved to when I was ten years old used to be near the city limits of the town, and there was a sense of country and space. Now it is surrounded with a settlement of cottages with picture windows, all just alike, and the air smells of exhaust and filling stations. For Columbus has grown; perhaps it has trebled since my childhood.

I visited Miss Helen and George Swift. Miss Helen is my mother’s oldest friend from childhood, and they are like sisters. George Swift is a mill man, president of a cotton manufacturing company. George and Miss Helen are very proud of the growth of Columbus, and I teased them when their talk sounded like the chamber of commerce. It is true that the standard of living has improved. There are still slums in Columbus, but I was not struck by the brutal poverty that had oppressed me when I saw it years ago. I remember being with my grandmother once, when I was a child, in a Christmas visit to the mill section, and I saw a baby sitting on a chamber pot by an open front door in a cold two-room house with only a puny blaze in the fireplace. The degradation and desolation of that single scene has never left me although it is more than twenty years ago. I did not see such abject scenes this time in Columbus.

At Miss Helen’s house a familiar person brought me my breakfast—she was my mother’s old cook. In the South, the general maid of work is always called the “cook.” As the man-servant is called the “yard man” or sometimes “houseboy.” In the South, a child is never called a “kid,” and the word “kids” seems to Georgian ears a Yankee vulgarity. On the other hand, children on feast days eat at the children’s table. In the old days they had to wait till the grown people were served, that meant until a child was grown he saw only the wings, backs, and Pope’s noses of chicken while he watched the grown folks eat the breasts, legs, and such. Fried chicken is perhaps Georgia’s best known dish, but field peas come a close second and a delicately flavored little white pea we call lady peas which is a cross between the field pea and the lentil. In the more worldly homes the cooking is influenced by New Orleans and Charleston fare. There is a most delicious dish we call Country Captain. This is a dish made of sliced roast chicken with curried tomatoes and almonds, which is always served with rice.
Any discussion of Georgia food is incomplete without the mention of watermelon. Some of the dearest memories of childhood concern the watermelon. It demands a special operation and procedure. Ideally, it should be opened and eaten on a cool back porch with newspapers on the table. It should be frosty, cold to the touch on fevered summer days. When the man of the family is poised with the knife there should be a hush around the table, a breathless and pleasant anxiety. Then when the knife plunges there should be a faint crack of the splitting fruit, then the anxious craning to see if it is properly ripe. The inside should be round with delicate white frosting and the seeds quite black. After the pink part has been eaten the white part can be continued a little longer and the rind saved for pickling.

To Georgians, Thanksgiving and Christmas always mean fruitcake. In our family we used to bake about twenty fruitcakes in our palmy days, some as gifts to our relatives in the North. Fruitcake baking takes days of preparation and many evenings of cracking and picking out nuts. We bought the walnuts, Brazil nuts, and almonds as well as the candied fruits, but I used to go to a pecan grove to gather the pecans. It was pleasant on a sunny day to rustle through the autumn leaves, hunting for pecans. It was cozy at night to pick out the cracked nuts and eat them with raisins. My mother’s recipe was from an old cookbook called Annie Dennis. I remember the name, but I don’t remember the directions—and I’ve never seen it again. It is a lost part of my Georgia childhood. After the cake with its subtle balance of fruits and nuts was blended and baked it was soaked in brandy and covered with a white cloth. The cut cake—it ought to be cut very thinly—has a look of stained glass with the greenish-yellow citron, red cherries, and the golden pineapple. Fruitcake is served in the afternoon in holiday season, and red homemade wine accompanies it. I remember when our house burned down, the thing my little brother saved among the smoke and falling rafters were two fruitcakes.

After the blue cool mountains of North Georgia it is hard to believe that the Okefenokee Swamp is in the same state. The Okefenokee Swamp is a tremendous body of fresh and stagnant water and timber that goes way across to the Florida
line. It was once the hunting ground of the lower Creeks and Seminoles. The name means “trembling earth,” and geologists believe that the Okefenokee was once a saltwater center. This ancient swamp has a geological similarity to Dismal Swamp in North Carolina and the Everglades in Florida. Large bodies of water stretch through labyrinths of moss-covered cypress trees, white and golden water-lilies and other tropical plants form vivid splashes against the silvery swaying screen of Spanish moss. Cypress and giant tupelo trees grow out of the water, and there is a mysterious gloom about the swamp. There are alligators there. My brother and his friends used to love to hunt in the Okefenokee. Once they told the family they ate rattlesnake meat there.

This is a region that gives Georgians tupelo honey. This most delicate of all honeys “carries me back,” as we say. My uncle was a member of a fishing club in the Okefenokee and he always brought back tupelo honey. I loved to stay with my Aunt Tieh, for there were five children in the family, an immense backyard with a great scuppernong arbor as well as fig and pecan trees. I would sit with my five cousins at the breakfast table, and with our thumbs we would gouge out a hole in our biscuits and carefully pour the tupelo honey in the hole. The scuppernong arbor was shady and cool under the glare and we would pick up the squelchy grapes with our bare toes. If you could pick up the scuppernong and put it in your mouth without falling down or holding on to something you were pretty good. Since children attract children there was always a swarm of visitors in the yard.

Every city has its special smell, and the smell of Savannah is unmistakable. It is a smell of a seacoast town. The salt smell is mixed with the sweetness of gardenias. The clear artesian water gives the smell of the city a hint of sulphur. And there are the smells of the wares of the vendors. All day the Geechee Negro hucksters sing out their wares in songs unintelligible to all but Savannahians. They carry great black baskets of fish, vegetables, and flowers balanced on their heads. In this respect Savannah is a twin sister of Charleston with its vendors chanting “she crab, she crab.” When the wind blows in Savannah there is a staccato rattle on the palmetto trees.
In an old house near the center of town a bachelor lives alone. His houseboy serves him sparse meals. And he is always served alone. On those rare occasions when guests are a necessity, he eats in his study—always alone. When a friend questioned him about this peculiarity, he answered, “I dislike to eat under the scrutiny of others.” This incident has stuck in my mind for years because this gentleman seems so un-Georgian. This peculiarity was accepted without too much surprise because there are plenty of “town characters” in this state, but he is the only Georgian I know of who does not dote on gathering his kin and friends, letting out all the leaves of his table, serving them the birds of his hunting, and offering them the best that his purse can afford. Although we have our share of eccentrics, I know very few Georgians who do not love fellowship, good hunting, food, and laughter—who do not enjoy life.