



A Good Ol' Delta Time

With an old-fashioned supper club, a trio of foodies is showing off the Delta's best.



by boyce upholt | photography by rory doyle

Had Edward Lee made a mistake? Amid the managed chaos—three sous chefs were rinsing pears and carting platters of raw marinated chicken and dredging thick slices of tomato through flour—Lee was not sure just what he'd dumped in the stockpot. He paused for a moment, holding the unlabeled, now-empty Mason jar. "I hope that was chicken stock," he said.

Lee, the acclaimed proprietor of 610 Magnolia in Louisville, Kentucky, had pulled into Bolivar County just a few hours before. He had come here—a tiny, cramped kitchen in the back of the service station at historic Dockery Plantation—to whip up a one-night-only, nine-course, locally sourced meal. "It's going to be a wild night," he said when he arrived.



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- David Crews



ABOVE: Hugh Balthorp, founder of Clarksdale's Sweet Magnolia Ice Cream, accepts an ovation for his gelato while his wife, Erica, smiles and cheers. Many purveyors were on hand to share the stories behind the food. OPPOSITE: David Crews, Kimme Hargrove, and Stewart Robinson, the masterminds behind the Delta Supper Club, chose Dockery Plantation as the site for their inaugural event thanks to its significant place in Delta mythology: Even B.B. King has declared the plantation the birthplace of the blues. The old service station was decked out for the occasion, including artful table settings with fresh produce trucked in from around the region. Crews, pictured bottom right, was especially excited about the okra.

ere was another jar, somewhere, of bourbon-peach glaze—certainly not the desired ingredient for these collard greens. David Crews, a noted local chef and one of the masterminds who convinced Lee to come, took a whiff of the empty jar. He nodded. "Chicken stock," he said, relieved.

he crew settled back into a happy, if manic, routine. Before long, someone cracked a typical kitchen joke—which means it was a sort no one wants me to repeat.

Welcome to the Delta Supper Club.

Sure, this party is serious: its founders will rattle off a list of cultural and charitable intentions. But it's also the Delta, which means it's got to be a little bit loose.

"The Delta is laid-back, almost laissez faire," Crews says. "It'll get done—but we always do it at our own pace. It's more about having a good time."

Stewart Robinson, dreamed up this dinner while leading duck hunts on Lake Washington (Robinson is a guide and chef with Glen Allan-based Esperanza Outdoors). Out-of-state clients, Robinson found, enjoy the Delta and its stories as much as they do the hunt. So a series of gourmet suppers could be a great way to show the world what the Delta's has to offer.

He sought out Crews and Kimme Hargrove, an account

executive for Greenwood-based marketing firm Hammons & Associates, to launch what the trio calls "a members-only social culinary circle." For \$100 yearly dues, members have the chance to buy tickets to up to four of the group's semi-monthly events.

Each dinner, designed and prepared by a new high-profile chef, is served in a historic Delta property. (Next up, on February 5: a meal at the New Roxy in Clarksdale, masterminded by Louisiana chef Cory Bahr). Between full-scale dinners, the club will host "pop-up potlucks" and cocktail hours.

Crews compares it to the old social clubs that thrived in the Delta in the 1970s and '80s. "It was about camaraderie, about being together," he says. "I want you to look at the person next to you and say, 'Pass the fried chicken, please.' We as a culture have gotten away from that." For the hosts, planning this event has built that togetherness: mere acquaintances when they launched last year, they now say they feel like family. And this was the family's first test.

As the sun set over Dockery, a suitably ad-hoc set of taxis pulled up to the red carpet—an old Oriental rug, unfurled atop the gravel lot—where diners mugged for the camera before nosing on ultra-local hors d'oeuvres: local rice, local



ABOVE: Chef Edward Lee built a menu that combined his key culinary influences—Southern, Korean, and New York City—with classic Delta ingredients. Lee was attentive to style and appearance as well as taste, carefully plating each course. The fried chicken, seasoned with adobo spices and served with a fiery Thai dipping sauce, was a crowd favorite. Brisket, topped with bourbon-peach glaze, was accompanied by spicy greens cooked with kimchi. OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Oysters, topped with a brown butter bourbon, flash-fried catfish with jalapeno-mint tartar sauce, and Sweet Magnolia's buttermilk brown sugar and bourbon gelato, served atop classic Chess Pie, were all cooked using Mississippi foods.

tomatoes, local pork. The hosts noted that as everybody sat, they took out their phones, snapped some photos, they put them away. The phones never reappeared; there was too much conversation and laughter. "To put 66 people in one room and to have everybody come together like this, it's just amazing," Hargrove said. "This vibe is something I've never felt before."

The servers, carting cast-iron skillets, dished out seemingly endless courses family-style: local honey for dipping bread; local oysters; ash-fried catfish, indispensable in the Delta; and, to end it all, gelato handmade in Clarksdale. This sort of farm-to-table dining is rare in the Delta, but Lee's menu made it look easy. And Robinson dreams of expanding the local offerings, from Delta-grown winter kale to Brussels sprouts. He plans to hand out seeds at future suppers that diners can plant in their own gardens, widening just slightly the breadth of veggies grown amid the Delta's big farms.

Near the end of the evening, Robinson whistled through his fingers to call the attention of the crowd. He wanted Crews to announce another recipient of the event's proceeds. In addition to catering and cooking for well-known hunting clubs, Crews leads the culinary program at Mississippi Delta Community College. He has talented students that get job offers in New Orleans or New York City but can't afford to make down

payments on apartments or turn on the lights. He told the diners that Delta Supper Club is developing a scholarship to support chefs who will carry Delta traditions out into the world.

Throughout dinner, Lee appeared for a moment at a time, escaping from the clatter of the kitchen. He introduced himself; he joked with friends old and new. He showed servers his preferred method for consuming brisket: the meat dangled from his fingers as he dipped it straight into a saucepan full of jus.

It was clear that he had found his tribe. Good food, good times—the good Delta life.

"Towns like this excite me," he said to Crews. "People say, 'Let's just do it.'"

Crews, Robinson, and Hargrove had said just that. And at the end of the night—as the last stack of dishes arrived in the kitchen, as the revelers took a final round of seltzes and piled into taxis out front—the Supper Club founders glanced around the tiny, empty service-station-turned-dining-room. They were grinning, pride apparent: It had been done. **M**

For more information, visit deltasupperclub.com or call 662.202.5695.



farm fresh delta

Eating local may seem more Brooklyn than back-road Mississippi. But more and more purveyors are providing top-quality goods in and around the Delta. The first Delta Supper Club dinner included a range of high-quality products from local producers and farmers.

- BROWN FAMILY DAIRY, Oxford
- DELTA BLUES RICE, Ruleville
- HOME PLACE PASTURES, Como
- LINDEN PLANTATION HONEY, Glen Allan
- SALAD DAYS PRODUCE, Flora
- SIMMONS CATFISH, Yazoo City
- SWEET MAGNOLIA ICE CREAM, Clarksdale

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Owner Hugh Balthorp measures an ingredient to make one of his amazing gelato flavors. Balthorp is proud to source local ingredients like Powell & Son's honey from Vance. The gelato machine that he uses was imported from Italy. OPPOSITE, TOP AND BOTTOM: Each pint of ice cream and gelato is hand-packed in the company's Clarksdale warehouse. His delicious frozen treat can be found in grocery stores, restaurants, and ice cream shops throughout the state.

To a driver speeding down Highway 49, the building is less than nondescript; just one more anonymous warehouse along the outskirts of Clarksdale. Train cars sit idle on the tracks along the building's side. In back, a cell tower stretches above farm fields.

But step inside and you'll find yourself in a kind of wonderland: A slight smell of milk and honey hangs just palpable in the air; shelves are stacked with nuts and candies and every ingredient you might imagine in ice cream—which is just what Hugh Balthorp and his crew have been crafting all day.

Donald Sutton collects a fresh batch of Nutella gelato as it pours from the machine that was imported from Italy. He passes the filled pail over to Chris McClenton, who hand-packs the finished product into pints. It's no surprise that both young men love their jobs. "We get free ice cream," McClenton says. "And there's air conditioning. You can't beat that." Balthorp, like a real-life Willy Wonka, wants the place to be fun for his employees. When there's a lull, he encourages the boys to lift weights or jab the punching bag that sits in a corner of the room.

Sweet Magnolia Ice Cream actually specializes in gelato, which is lower in fat than most ice cream, and less airy, and therefore more flavorful. His crew produces hundreds of flavors, from the expected to the obscure. This morning a chef called Balthorp to rell orders of bourbon peanut butter chocolate chip and mango mascarpone gelato.

Sutton notes that trying all the flavors is another perk of

the job, though in a recent taste test he wasn't fond of avocado. "I can't even keep track, man," Balthorp says, when asked for the precise number of flavors.

Six years ago, ice cream was a casual at-home project; just a few batches Balthorp whipped up for his three kids. They were a hit, and soon he began to make ice cream for friends. The response made it clear that he had a business opportunity on his hands, and his wife, Erica, told him he had to find production space outside the house.

Now he's been in his factory—a business incubation space he rents from the Clarksdale Chamber of Commerce—for almost five years. These days, Sweet Magnolia can produce 50 pints a day and sells the gelato to 100 restaurants and retail stores across the mid-South—from Georgia to Tennessee—making his craft big business.

Balthorp often sits at a computer in the corner clicking through QuickBooks, but he once ran an art gallery in Washington, D.C. These days he likes to think of ice cream as his canvas. Creating the perfect flavor requires a consideration of balance—milk with cream and sugar and eggs—but also creativity and openness to whimsy.

"I love to stay in that crazy zone," Balthorp says. "It's always a challenge."

Balthorp loves food. The stacks of cookbooks around the warehouse come not only from creameries and dairies but also from award-winning Southern chefs. He keeps pictures on his phone of his visits to the nation's top restaurants and points out how they, like he, emphasize

sourcing local ingredients. His milk, cream, and eggs come from Oxford; his pecans from Indianola; his blueberries from Senatobia.

"It just makes sense," he says. "You support the community where you live. You employ people where you live. Last week I signed five checks. I can sleep good at night."

He drives Mississippi's back-roads to find new ingredients. Today he tears down the highway into Quitman County to visit Harvey Powell, his source for honey. Balthorp spots a box of peaches on the kitchen table. "Where do you all get your peaches from?" he asks, and he nods when Powell names the same farmer from whom Sweet Magnolia sources.

Despite this local commitment, Balthorp was not raised in the Delta. He followed Erica, a physician, to town in 2000, when she took a job at the Woman's Clinic. She had spent childhood summers in the Delta, and now Mississippi is home. All three of his children were born in the Delta—his Delta babies, he calls them.

Hot and swampy, even in springtime, the Delta is the perfect place for ice cream. As Balthorp joins his employees in the day's normal tasks—tidying, cleaning the machines—the setting sun bakes the landscape with that famous Mississippi heat. As they open the garage door to back in the delivery van, the humidity rushes in. But then the work is done, and the team sits down to end this day in the only appropriate way: a scoop of peanut butter gelato—fresh, sweet, and cool amid the heat. M

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