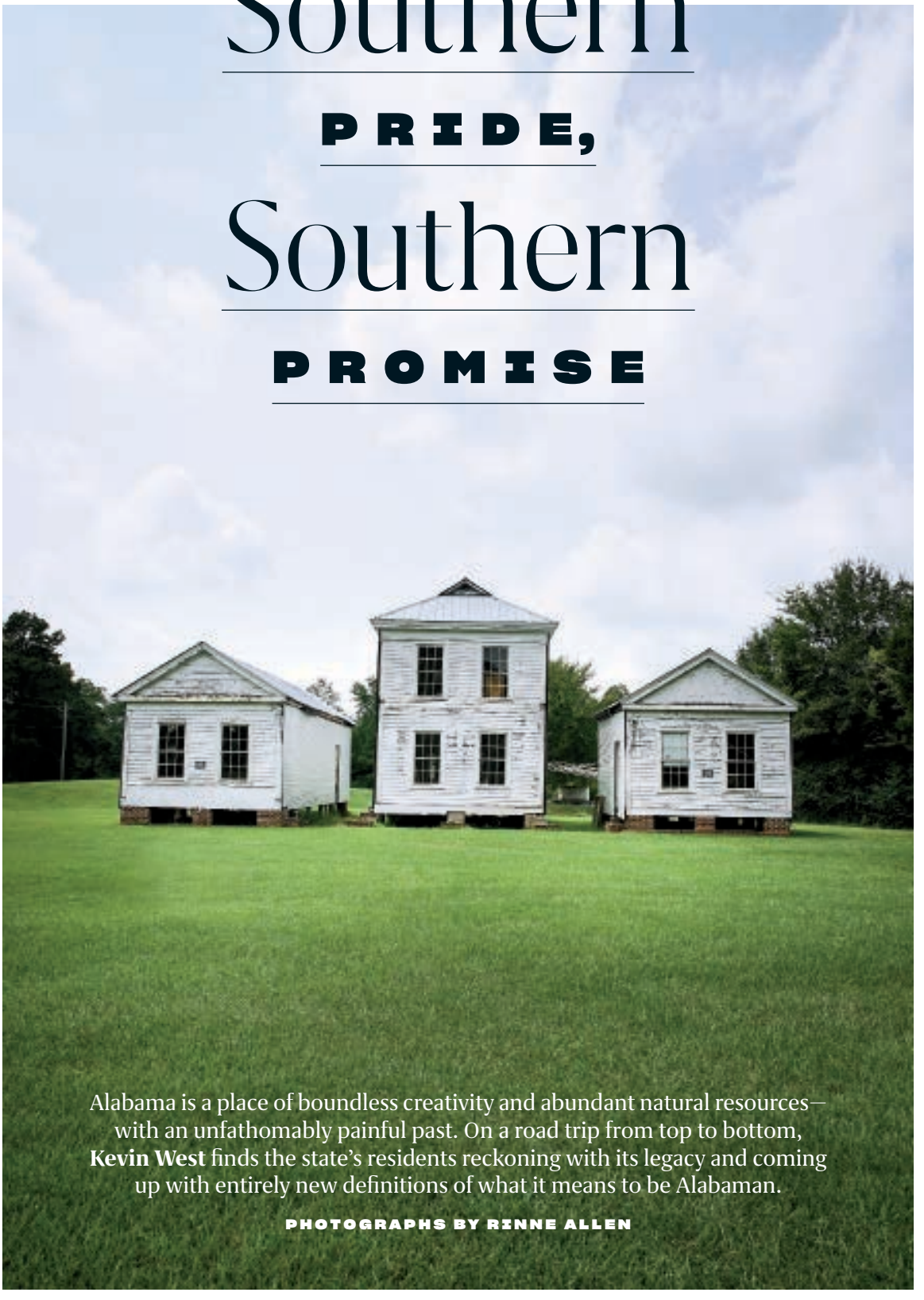
Southern PRIDE, Southern PROMISE



Alabama is a place of boundless creativity and abundant natural resources—with an unfathomably painful past. On a road trip from top to bottom, **Kevin West** finds the state's residents reckoning with its legacy and coming up with entirely new definitions of what it means to be Alabaman.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY RINNE ALLEN

Highlands Bar & Grill pastry chef Dolester Miles (left) and co-owners Pardis and Frank Stitt at their Birmingham restaurant. Opposite: Chantilly House, a project by Auburn University's design/build studio in Alabama's Black Belt.

The devil was beating his wife as I crossed the Alabama state line. I was driving from Nashville, in a hurry to reach Muscle Shoals, and I had gotten to the point where I-65 snakes down from middle Tennessee's Highland Rim.

When the highway levels out again and runs straight, you're in the cotton-growing Heart of Dixie, as Alabama has been known since the 1950s.

The windshield wipers on my rental car frantically tried to keep pace with an August downpour. Then, in a clap, the sun broke through and electrified the gloom, even as the rain continued to fall—in Southern folklore, that's the devil beating his wife. Luminous spray trembled above the road, and sunlight bounced off wet pastures on either side. Light and mist rose together, particulate gold. On the stereo, Aretha Franklin's voice climbed through the verses of "Mary, Don't You Weep," shining in glory with the sun. When the clouds closed again, I was off the interstate and on a two-lane behind a car with the license plate LUV BAMA. I passed a field of King Cotton, its leaves dark as poison ivy.

Muscle Shoals was not meant to be on my itinerary, but I was in Nashville when I heard about Aretha's death, and decided to pay my respects at FAME Studios, where the Queen of Soul laid down tracks that would eventually become her career-defining hit record, *I Never Loved a Man the Way I Love You*. I bought a funeral wreath and a vintage LP of *Aretha's Gold* to leave as tributes and drove to FAME in a car called Soul—honest to goodness, the rental agency issued me a Kia Soul. The studio would close at five.

When I got there at 4:15, the nice man in the front office listened to my story and said the last tour of the day had already begun, but I was welcome to join it. I pushed open a door into the carpeted studio. A FAME sound engineer interrupted his tour to greet me. "Come in," he said. "I'm telling some stories about Aretha Franklin."

He was in the middle of a famous one: how Atlantic Records producer Jerry Wexler had brought Franklin to FAME to record with the Swampers, the house band that would go on to back the Rolling Stones, Etta James, and Paul Simon, earning the group—and FAME itself—music immortality. The session lasted just one day because of a drunken fight between Aretha's husband and a musician. The Swampers later flew to New York to finish the album's title track as well as "Respect," Aretha's first number one hit. The Queen had arrived, and her reign began on a single day in this very room, the sound engineer said.

The visitors glanced around, shook their heads, made little noises. One spoke: "It was a...." he said, before words buckled under the weight of his awe. The engineer finished the thought for him—for all of us. "It was a milestone."

A WEEK OF MILESTONES: that's how I'd describe my road trip through Alabama. My home state is Tennessee, but I'd never been to Alabama apart from one drunken New Year's Eve in Opelika. Most of what little I knew about the state boiled down to the civil rights era and college football. And the music, from the Blind Boys of Alabama to the Alabama Shakes. If pressed, I could have come up with Truman Capote and Harper Lee whispering childhood secrets in Monroeville, white barbecue sauce, and something about the space program in Huntsville. The Alabama of my mind was hung with faded garlands, and the thought of it made me uneasy, like a family member who sometimes lets slip a racist word.






Clockwise from top left: The Montgomery church where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. preached from 1954 to 1960; owner Johnny Fisher (left) and chef Bill Briand at their Orange Beach restaurant, Fisher's; the Edmund Pettus Bridge, in Selma, site of the famed 1965 civil rights march; a quilter at work in Gee's Bend; Birmingham mayor Randall Woodfin; a sign marking the spot where Rosa Parks's civil disobedience launched the Montgomery bus boycott; local oysters at the Royal Oyster, in Gulf Shores. Center: Downtown Birmingham.

It had nothing to do, in other words, with what I'd been hearing from trusted friends about the vibrant, progressive Alabama they knew: The flourishing fashion and music scenes around Florence, across the river from Muscle Shoals. The sophisticated food culture in Birmingham. The experimental architecture and agriculture out in the Black Belt, a region named for its rich, dark soil. Rebirth, returns, accolades. Last year, a new monument, the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, opened in Montgomery. (Its colloquial handle, "the lynching memorial," is more painfully descriptive.) Then there was the grand reopening of the Grand Hotel on Mobile Bay, and, down at Gulf Shores, a new generation of oyster farmers, fishermen, and chefs who, post–Deepwater Horizon, have been rebranding the stretch of shoreline sardonically called the Redneck Riviera. Even Alabama politics has held surprises. In 2017, Democrat Doug Jones, an attorney who successfully prosecuted two of the Klansmen who bombed Birmingham's 16th Street Baptist Church in 1963, was elected to the U.S. Senate. That same year, Randall Woodfin, a charismatic 37-year-old African-American political novice, won the Birmingham mayoral race. On the eve of its 200th anniversary of statehood, there was a new Alabama to discover.

I was apprehensive all the same. Alabama is not uniquely burdened with America's racial history, I know. The Southern Poverty Law Center, based in Montgomery, has documented hate groups in every one of these United States. But somehow the buried mass of injustice seemed closer to the surface in the state where Jefferson Davis was sworn in as president of the Confederacy. To prepare, I reread Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail" and clicked through pictures of marchers under attack by police dogs and officers wielding fire hoses.

"ARE YOU ALABAMA HOUSES?"

I had just sat down for dinner at Odette, a farm-to-table restaurant in Florence. The man speaking to me was a silver fox: a sweep of hair, natty dress, gentry accent. I wasn't sure I heard him right. "Are you Alabama Houses?" he repeated, explaining that he and his wife thought I resembled the amateur architectural historian behind the Instagram account @alabamahouses. The man introduced himself as Fennel Mauldin and insisted I join them for dinner.

Fennel and Evie Mauldin grew up in the area and knew everybody. Their stories came like hors d'oeuvres—artful and tasty. Like how the hotel where I was staying, the GunRunner, used to be a Cadillac dealership, its lobby bar a Cadillac-size freight elevator. How fashion designer Billy Reid turned his annual food/music/ideas festival, the Shindig, into something like a homegrown South by Southwest. And how Florence's other big designer, Natalie Chanin, runs a café at the factory of her Alabama Chanin label that serves the best brunch for miles.

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"This has happened in the past five years," Fennel said. "My generation left. They all moved to Atlanta. What's different now is the younger generations are staying."

The next morning at Alabama Chanin, I tried out Fennel's thesis on Natalie Chanin, unmissable with her Emmylou Harris–white hair. She didn't disagree, but placed Florence's renaissance within a longer historical context. "There's always been a creative bent to the area," Chanin said in her honeysuckle accent, name-checking musicians and Pulitzer-winning novelists. Creativity is part of Alabama's "legacy," she said, and then stopped and stepped back from a word that can stink of Confederate nostalgia.

How, I asked, did she remain sensitive to Alabama's past without becoming dismayed by it? Natalie told me about an oral-history project she had launched, Project Threadways, to collect textile workers' stories, giving voice to people who had long been ignored. Before that, Alabama Chanin had once planted a field of cotton and invited volunteers to help handpick the crop; some were joyful, others overcome with grief. Natalie's point, Southern in its indirection, seemed to be that Alabama's legacy of creativity gave her the means to respond to that other legacy. "There's a lot of blood in this earth," she said. "Maybe this is one step toward healing."

Not far from Alabama Chanin, I saw another project that, like a field of cotton, was more complex than it appeared. It contained some 8.5 million pounds of stone stacked over the course of 30 years by Tom Hendrix, who died in 2017. The low, wandering wall looked like a labyrinth that had been unfolded. It memorializes Hendrix's great-great-grandmother, Te-lah-nay, a Yuchi tribe member who was forced onto the Trail of Tears, then later braved great danger to come back

The Memorial for Peace and Justice, in Montgomery, honors the memory of lynching victims across the United States.

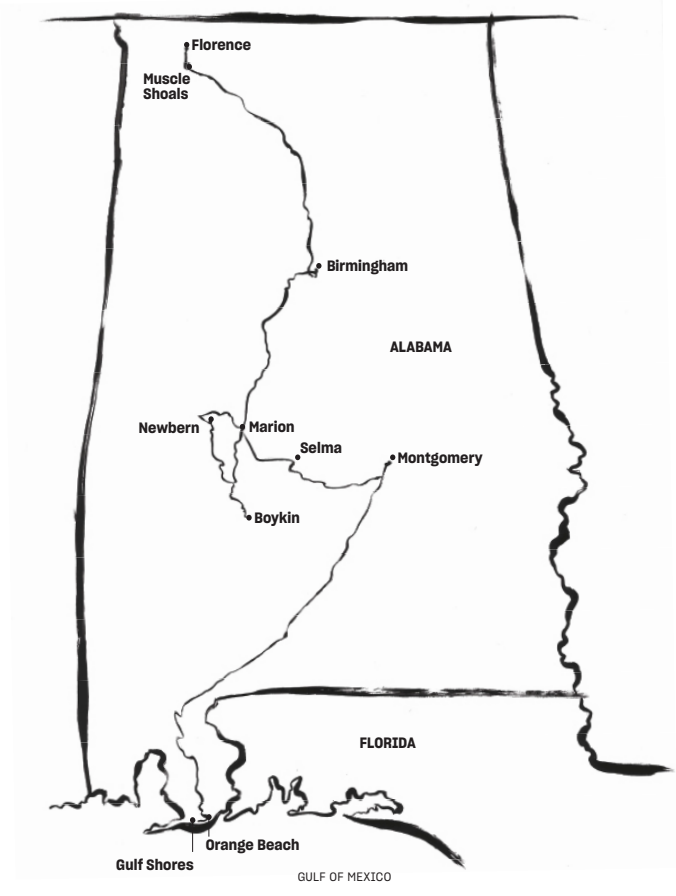
From left: Scott Peacock dyeing linens with his homegrown indigo; Gulf State Park, on Alabama's southern coast; Birmingham's Sloss Furnaces, a relic of the city's industrial-manufacturing days.

from Oklahoma, alone and on foot. The artist's son, Trace, explained that one side of the wall, a straight path away from a central circle, represented Te-lah-nay's removal. The other side, which he called "the dark path," was her return. "It twists and turns," he said, "because your journey through life is never easy."

Te-lah-nay's long walk resonated with history's other perilous journeys, from Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt to John Lewis and the foot soldiers crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge on their freedom march from Selma to Montgomery.

TOWARD THE END of dinner that night at Highlands Bar & Grill, in Birmingham, Red Dog set the table for dessert. Holding a silver spoon by the end of its handle, he lowered it into its proper place, just so, on the white tablecloth. Born Goren Avery, Red Dog has waited tables at chef-owner Frank Stitt's flagship restaurant since it opened in 1982, ascending the ranks of his profession to the status of living landmark. Highlands pastry chef Dolester Miles—Miss Dol to her juniors—has also been with Stitt since the start. Her win at the James Beard Awards last year mattered on several levels: she was the first African American to claim the honor, and the first self-taught pastry chef.

"My aunt and my mom, we used to make desserts together when I was coming up," Miles told me when I sat down with her, Stitt, and Stitt's wife and business partner, Pardis, for coffee and a slice of Miss Dol's



signature coconut cake. "You know, I loved it when I was little, and it all came back. I was like, 'This is what I really want to do.' So Frank gave me my opportunity."

The night Miles won, Highlands did as well, winning outstanding restaurant of the year after nine times as a finalist. What the Stitts have accomplished over 37 years goes beyond intelligent cooking, fabulous staff, and a dining room that flatters traditionalist ideas about Southern hospitality. Highlands essentially founded Alabama's progressive food scene with the revolutionary idea that Southern cuisine could be elevated with prime ingredients, meticulous technique, and unstuffy service. Generations of chefs have emerged from Stitt's kitchen as disciples of that gospel. When I asked for the secret to Highlands' longevity, his response was quick: "Respect for one another."

"We insisted on people having a sense of... character," he continued, with a half-moment's pause to locate the precisely weighted word. "We insisted that people not be racist, that people not be rude, that they not be homophobic. When we have our full meeting, 170 people, there is very much a sense that we're working for a good cause. Don't you think, Dol?"

"Mm-hmm," said Miles. "I always felt like I was a part of this family. I never felt any different. That's why I stayed so long."

Birmingham is a relatively new city, founded in 1871. Its early iron and steel industries transformed the raw red-clay landscape so quickly that Birmingham earned the nickname Magic City. Suburban Mountain Brook sprouted mansions, and downtown leaped with skyscrapers, hotels, theaters, and department stores. That was white Birmingham.

Black Birmingham also prospered: the business community around the current Civil Rights Institute downtown included the offices of Oscar Adams Jr., the first African American admitted to the bar in Birmingham, and A. G. Gaston, a businessman who, when he died in 1996, left an estate worth tens of millions. But for Birmingham's black citizens, daily life was defined by Jim Crow. Segregated schools, theaters, restaurants, and parks were typical of the era. Less typical was Birmingham's eventual notoriety. Charles Moore's photographs of the 1963 Good Friday march, the ones I had seen online of Bull Connor's men attacking the marchers, were published by *Life* and spread like airborne ash from a distant wildfire. That September, the bombing at the 16th Street Baptist Church killed four teenage girls and offended common decency everywhere. The events of 1963 cemented Birmingham's place in American history.

"Birmingham is unique in that we reckoned with our differences on the world stage," said Mayor Woodfin the morning I met him in his office. "It happened in other cities, but here you saw it."

Woodfin, who jokes that he grew a beard to appear more mayoral, came home to Alabama after law school to make a difference. With charisma, big ideas, and almost no prior political experience, he rallied voters with the campaign message *We deserve better.* Birmingham long ago ceased to be an economic powerhouse; two generations of postindustrial decline had hollowed it out. Woodfin's agenda since gaining office, he told me, has focused on three key items, each of which is "neighborhood revitalization."

Neighborhood revitalization was, in fact, exactly what I had seen the previous day. **(Continued on page 108)**

An Alabama Road Trip

Spend four to five days wending your way through the state, from Muscle Shoals to the Gulf Coast.

Getting There

To replicate this road trip, fly into Huntsville—it's reachable through hubs like Atlanta, Chicago, and Dallas-Fort Worth—then drive an hour west to Muscle Shoals.

Florence & Muscle Shoals

The 10-suite **GunRunner** *(gunrunnerhotel.com; doubles from $139)* celebrates the area's creative heritage. Visit the **Factory** *(alabamachanin.com)* for an unbeatable brunch and locally made housewares, **FAME Studios** *(famestudios.com; tours $10)* for a glimpse of music history, and **Odette** *(odettealabama.com; entrées $12–$29)* for dinner. While in the area, see **Te-lah-nay's Wall** *(ifthelegendsfade.com),* a large-scale work memorializing a Yuchi woman's return after her forced removal from the state.

Birmingham

The **Grand Bohemian Hotel** *(kesslercollection.com; doubles from $299),* in the suburb of Mountain Brook, lives up to its name, with jewel-tone furnishings and a gallery. Get your Southern-food fix at the **Highlands Bar & Grill** *(highlandsbarandgrill.com; entrées $24–$44)* and **Saw's BBQ** *(sawsbbq.com; entrées $7–$10).* The **U.S. Civil Rights Trail** *(civilrightstrail.com)* has a list of notable sights in town.

Montgomery & the Black Belt

In Montgomery, it's vital to experience the **National Memorial for Peace and Justice** *(museumandmemorial.eji.org)* and the **Civil Rights Memorial** *(splcenter.org).* In the Black Belt, sign up for a biscuit workshop with **Scott Peacock** *(chefscottpeacock.com),* in Marion, and visit the **Gee's Bend Welcome Center** in Boykin *(County Rd. 29; 334-573-0020)*

The Gulf Coast

White-sand beaches are the main draw, but while you're there, sample the seafood at **Fisher's** *(fishersobm.com; entrées $24–$38)* and check in to the eco-minded **Lodge at Gulf State Park** *(lodgeatgulfstatepark.com; doubles from $294)* to immerse yourself in the area's natural beauty.

(Alabama, continued from page 93)

The gentrifying neighborhoods I drove through had everything today's tourist or transplant might want. Beaux Arts skyscrapers have been transformed into boutique hotels. The Pizitz department store has new life as a mixed-use development with apartments above a food hall. Commercial districts have gentrified wholesale with farmers' markets, craft breweries, and self-aware restaurants—a new Magic City. In the historic enclave of Avondale, I had lunch at Saw's BBQ, then went next door to Post Office Pies for a wood-fired pizza to go. Aretha was playing at both—as well as at the Pizitz and in a gallery of the Civil Rights Institute—part of a citywide show of R-E-S-P-E-C-T for a life that included singing at Dr. King's funeral and, further along the arc of the moral universe, at Barack Obama's inauguration.

I mentioned Avondale to the mayor and asked if that's the kind of revitalization he had in mind. Yes, he said, but his goal is to improve all 99 city neighborhoods, including the 88, many predominantly black, that have not flourished anew. I asked him the same question I'd asked Chanin, about how to reckon with the past without being defeated by it.

"I tell people this," the mayor said. "From a historical perspective, Birmingham has shown the world once how to pivot away from hatred. There was resistance to change, and we were also the poster child for how to make change. When those forces met, change won out."

KNOWINGLY OR NOT, the mayor's take on Birmingham—a telling that honors the moral heroism of the civil rights era and also acknowledges the injustices that made it necessary—aligns with recent efforts at the state level to change how people think about Alabama. To replace the image of Bull Connor's police force, for instance, with something inspiring. One part of those efforts is the U.S. Civil Rights Trail, which spans 100 sites across 15 states—26 in Alabama alone. Launched last year, it's currently under review for UNESCO World Heritage designation. The campaign's tagline explains why: "What happened here changed the world."

A few days later, the Civil Rights Trail led me to Montgomery's Dexter Avenue. It runs uphill from Court Square, site of the former slave market, to the Alabama State Capitol, where George Wallace gave his infamous "segregation forever" speech on the steps where Jefferson Davis was sworn in. Standing sentinel between the two is Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church, built in 1889 of red brick and named in memory of the pastor who served there from 1954 to 1960. Tour director Wanda Battle hugged me when I entered. "We love on everybody who comes in here," she said. "That is a part of what this legacy is all about." That word again, but here glinting with hope 50 years after King's assassination.

Battle was luminous. I felt improved by her presence. She showed me the office in which King organized the bus boycott and told me about the 16 elderly members who still remembered him. She sang "This Little Light of Mine" to demonstrate the church's acoustics and insisted I visit the Legacy Museum and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, twin projects from Montgomery's Equal Justice Initiative. "I cried so hard when I visited," she said. "They made me more convinced of the importance of my taking responsibility to love people every day."

I hugged Battle and went where she sent me. Both visits require time. Each is heavy. The museum is dense with text. The memorial has little apart from the names engraved in 800 monuments, one for each county in the U.S. where a lynching occurred. Visitors appear raw and unguarded.

Later, I realized the genius of the memorial is that it makes us grieve in broad daylight. Hidden shame and rage are brought out to be aired in full view of companions and strangers alike. Private emotions are transformed into public monument. It makes no sense to say my experience there was beautiful, but, on levels both personal and historical, it felt essential to our national journey.

"I'VE NEVER MADE the same biscuits twice," said chef Scott Peacock, perhaps the most skilled caretaker of the Southern home-cooking tradition, as his hands coaxed flour and buttermilk into a salutary alliance, "and I have tried." It was before breakfast at Reverie, a white-columned mansion in Marion, my first stop in the Black Belt, and Peacock had already laid out honey, jam, and "enough butter to float a battleship." He was giving me a preview of his new project: small-group workshops on the art of Southern biscuits. "It's a practice," he said. "It definitely is. I marvel at it every time."

Alabama's Black Belt is a 19-county swath of rich topsoil at the heart of the broader southern Black Belt. It was once the state's wealthiest region: the throne room of King Cotton, the Saudi Arabia of agriculture. Before the Civil War, its landed

aristocrats outdid one another in feudal lavishness, throwing parties with actual jousting tournaments. Peacock quoted a resident of the era who said, "There are two places in this world where it is possible to live a civilized life: Paris, France, and Unionville, Alabama." The luxurious way of life, dependent upon the inhumane economics of slavery, grew shabby without it, and the Black Belt declined. What remained was antebellum architecture and poverty.

An hour deeper into the Black Belt, the hamlet of Boykin dozes in a bend of the Alabama River. Peacock took me there to meet Mary Lee Bendolph, who sat on her porch, dressed and ready, studying the Bible as she waited for us to arrive. (I asked: the 23rd Psalm.) Bendolph belongs to a community of slave descendants known as the Gee's Bend Quilters, whose creations rise to the level of great American art. She welcomed us with hugs and a throaty laugh, then took us inside to see pictures of her grandchildren and the quilt she sewed for the Obamas in 2009. Bendolph, who no longer sews, accompanied us to the Gee's Bend Welcome Center, where the public can meet quilters who continue the tradition.

Before we left Reverie, Peacock finished rolling out his biscuit dough and got a pan into the hot oven. He grew up close to the Florida state line but is now a Black Belt stalwart. His antique house, maintained in a state of splendid disrepair, sits on Marion's main drag, and his backyard garden is a one-man agricultural experiment station that honors the spirit of George Washington Carver, the African-American botanist and environmentalist who championed alternatives to soil-depleting cotton. In a twist, Peacock's principal crop, unlike Carver's favored peanuts, is inedible. He plants indigo and processes it for pigment. "I grew that blue," he said of his sky-colored T-shirt, a suitable companion for his cloudlike hair.

NEAR THE END of my trip, I was at a marina in Orange Beach, about to eat some Alabama-grown oysters at Fisher's restaurant. Owner Johnny Fisher, a Mobile native, had just brought them from the kitchen, where chef Bill Briand, a two-time Beard semifinalist for best chef in the South, had disappeared for the start of dinner service. I was mid-reach when someone at the table proposed, with winking solemnity, that we raise a glass to Ed King, who had died that day. Who? King, I was told, played guitar for Lynyrd Skynyrd and cowrote "Sweet Home Alabama." I was struck by the symmetry, a second passing to bookend my trip, although this one wasn't much noticed, even on the Redneck Riviera.

As far as I could tell, Gulf Shores and Orange Beach didn't really live up to the nickname. The mind-set of the Alabama beachfront seemed open to change, at least around food. Fisher champions sustainable fisheries—his version of the culinary good morals practiced by Frank Stitt in Birmingham. Another local chef, Chris Sherrill, founded a group to promote consumption of abundant Gulf species considered "trash fish." He explained his idea over tacos made from bluewing searobin, an ugly big-headed slimeball that tasted great with salsa and kudzu-lime crema. Likewise, a new generation of oyster farmers, producers like Lew Childress of Shellbank Selects, raise small, sculpted oysters that bring a premium over typical Gulf oysters grown out to the size of a tourist's sweaty palm.

Credit the oil spill and oldsters. The Deepwater Horizon disaster initially led to a ruinous moratorium on Gulf seafood sales, but a multibillion-dollar restitution fund has since helped Alabama's shore communities rebuild. Affluent retirees arrived like horseshoe crabs on the spring tide, and snowbirds now flock to the upscale eateries.

"Disaster won't create your change," explained one longtime resident the next day over lunch, "but it will accelerate your rate of change. We've seen that after each storm, and we've seen it after the oil spill."

The group at the table, which included the mayors of Gulf Shores and Orange Beach, wanted to talk about shiny new ideas: the eco-lodge at Gulf Shore Park and programs to protect endangered sea turtles. What I brought up was, perhaps, a nuisance. I asked what they thought about the region's reputation as the Redneck Riviera. People waved hands as if shooing flies at a church supper. The consensus was that stereotypes linger among people who haven't actually been to Alabama. The cure for ignorance is travel.

"If we get 'em here, we'll change their minds," said the longtime resident. "You rarely hear someone say they're gonna retire and move up north."

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