

# At Home in the Delta

Deborah Boykin

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The Mississippi Delta is a region that depends, first and last, on growing things. Most of the land, and much of the time and energy of the people, are given over to crops, whether cotton or catfish. Mile after mile of fields stretch between small towns with names like Panther Burn, Alligator, and Louise. Interminable plant rows or flat, shimmering catfish ponds extend from road to horizon. Turnrows — the lanes of hard-packed dirt where drivers turn cultivators or cotton pickers — are all that separate one field from another. The landscape is vast, symmetrical, and hypnotic. From the deep greens of summer to the browns and greys of harvest time, the fields change only with the seasons.

While the fields of the Delta offer little contrast, the same cannot be said of the lives and homes of its people. Wealth and poverty exist side by side, with very little middle ground. Planters whose elegant homes are surrounded by formal gardens may have neighbors who live in weathered frame houses with swept yards and tire planters. Still, there are similarities across class and race lines, and nowhere are these similarities more evident than in the gardens, homes, and kitchens of the Delta.

There are some distinctions to be drawn between the gardens in town and those in the country, as well as between the spaces created by Black gardeners and those of their White counterparts. Flower gardens in town are more likely to be formal, for instance, and confined to back yards. These gardeners plant flowers to use in arrangements indoors as well as for enjoyment outdoors. Rural gardens more often have flowering plants in the front yard and vegetables in the back. Rural Black gardeners are more apt to extend their garden space to the front porch, using a variety of containers. These are stylistic variations for the most part, though. The function of gardens in the Delta is much the same whoever plants them.

For most people in the Delta, the garden is an extension of living space. Summer heat is completely democratic, sending planters, field workers, and merchants in search of shade and a cool breeze. In the days before air conditioning, they would all seek refuge from the heat in their gardens and on their porches. Even now, the warmer months find many Delta families taking meals, sitting and visiting, or entertaining guests in their gardens.

Gardens in the Delta tend to be lush, tightly planted, and enclosed. Sometimes the enclosure is a clipped privet hedge. Formal gardens may be surrounded by hairpin wire fencing or homemade picket. Sometimes the homemade



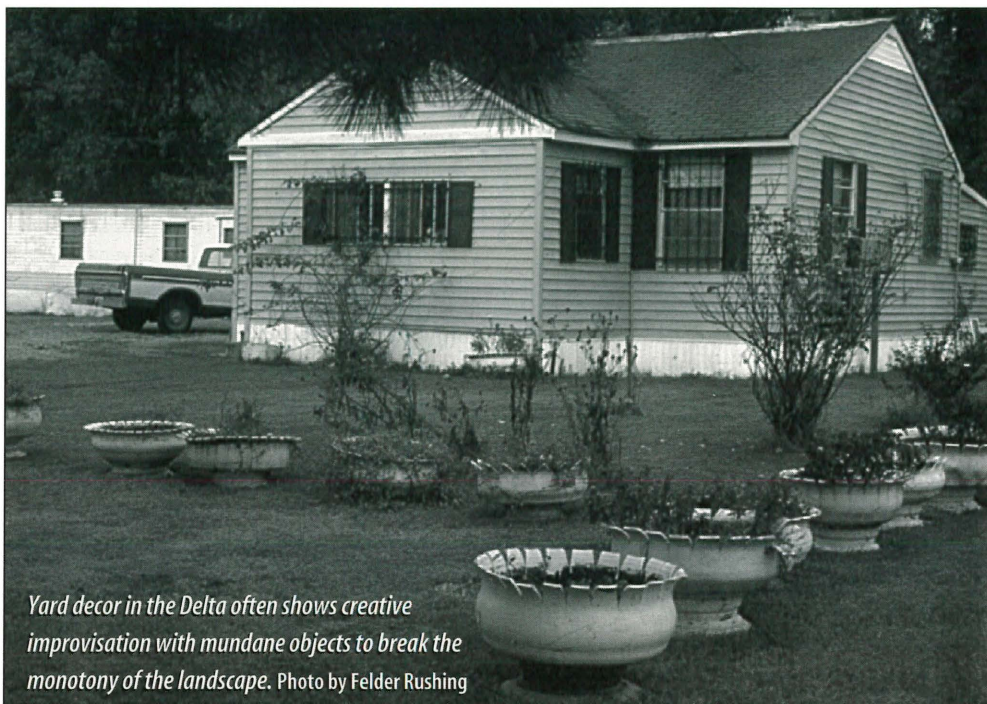
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*In Southern Black folklore, the bottle tree was a means of protecting the home by trapping evil spirits within the colorful bottles. Though scarce today, bottle trees are still created for their artistic appeal. Photo by William Ferris, University of Mississippi Special Collections*

fencing is more eccentric, incorporating a variety of found materials. In any case, the purpose of the fencing is to enclose the space while allowing air to circulate. Gardenias, four o'clocks, honeysuckle, and magnolias provide fragrance in the late afternoon and evening. Broad-leaved plants like elephant ears, cannas, and ginger may grow in beds alongside ferns and castor beans. Other plants are placed in containers, perhaps as a nod to the unpredictable weather of the region: a container can be moved under cover when there's too much rain or closer to a hose during a summer dry spell. More than likely, though, Delta gardeners use containers and other items — functional, decorative, or both — to create a space that reflects a personal aesthetic.

The more formal the garden, the more common are matching containers, such as urns made of molded con-



*Yard decor in the Delta often shows creative improvisation with mundane objects to break the monotony of the landscape. Photo by Felder Rushing*

*Hazel Dailey from Columbia, Louisiana, works with the insert to the pressure cooker she uses in canning produce.*

*Photo by Sylvia Frantom*



crete or purchased half-barrels. Decorative pieces may include concrete statuary, often figures of small animals. Lawn furniture usually consists of a matched set and is made from wrought iron and painted.

Other gardeners like to improvise. They create planters from old enamelware, paint buckets, or tires. They decorate their gardens with painted plywood figures, whirligigs, or painted rocks. In rural yards and gardens, larger, free-standing decorations such as bottle trees break the monot-



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ony of the landscape. For example, travelers on Highway 61 approaching Ergemont, Mississippi, are sometimes surprised to see several large, welded-metal dinosaurs on the horizon. They are the work of a local resident who made them “to give people driving through something to look at.”

Many Delta gardeners give as much thought to the aesthetics of their yard and garden space as they do to their homes, probably because the two are inextricable. Wedding receptions, barbecues, family reunions, parties, and other social events in the Delta are very likely to take place outside. And there is no shortage of social life in the Delta. Entertaining is considered an art form, and Delta women, both Black and White, absorb a complicated set of customs and recipes from their relatives and neighbors as they grow up. Delta homemakers take pride in a tradition of hospitality that many see as having roots in plantation life.

Three Delta cookbooks provide some insights. *Gour-*

*met of the Delta*, first published in 1958, is a collection of recipes prepared by the Women’s Auxiliaries of St. John’s Episcopal Church in Leland, Mississippi, and St. Paul’s in nearby Hollandale. The introduction describes the Delta as a region settled

by the sons of wealthy planters of Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, and South Carolina. They came ... to further their fortunes in new land. From these landed, cultured people descend many of the present Delta inhabitants.... Many have known the hospitality and graciousness of Delta hostesses.... It is our hope ... in compiling the recipes of our own and those of our many friends for discriminating hostesses everywhere that we, in our small way, will be the means of help to preserve one of the traditions of the ‘Delta Way of Life.’

In 1972, the Junior Charity League of Monroe, Louisi-

### Tamales

2 cups of Minsa (*masa harina*)  
1/3 cup vegetable shortening or lard  
2 Tbs. cooking oil  
5 lbs. meat (pork, beef, or chicken)  
2 cups broth  
6 dried red chili peppers  
8 oz. corn shucks  
1 tsp. cumin  
1 tsp. black pepper  
Salt to taste  
16 oz. mixed vegetables (onions, bell pepper, celery, shallots, green onions), fresh or frozen

**Servings:** Approximately 25 tamales

**To prepare the corn husks:** Place husks in hot water and soak until pliable. Remove any silks and wash husks thoroughly. Keep the shucks that have split, as two small pieces can be overlapped to make one.

**To prepare masa dough:** In a bowl, mix together the *masa harina*, vegetable shortening or lard, salt, and 1 1/2 to 2 cups of lukewarm meat broth (the leftover reserve from cooking the meat).

**To prepare filling:** Put cooking oil and meat half covered with water in a skillet. Cook until the meat is soft enough to shred. Meat may be prepared ahead of time or the day before. Using broth from the cooked meat, soak the dry chili peppers until they are

reconstituted. Purée peppers in blender, adding more broth if necessary. Add cumin and black pepper to the puréed peppers. Mix shredded meat and chili sauce.

**To make tamales:** Remove the shucks from water and place on a table or in your hands. Spread dough down the center, then spoon in a strip of filling (about 2 tablespoons). Roll the sides of the shucks to close the filling completely within the dough. Tie the ends or fold. Place in a steamer rack above water in a large pot. Place the wrapped tamales loosely to allow the steam to circulate. Steam for 45 minutes to an hour, or until *masa* dough doesn’t stick to shuck. Test the tamale in the center for doneness.

—Recipe by **Irma Rodriguez**, Ferriday, Louisiana

### Cheese Straws

1/2 lb. butter  
1 lb. cheddar cheese, 1/2 sharp, 1/2 medium  
3 cups plain flour, sifted  
2 tsp. salt  
2 tsp. red pepper  
2 tsp. baking powder

Cream butter and grated cheese. Add dry ingredients and beat until very soft and creamy. Squeeze through cookie press into 4" lengths on ungreased cookie sheet. Bake at 350° for 13 to

15 minutes, checking that they do not burn.

—Recipe from **Mrs. John Gannon**, Greenville, Mississippi

### Southern-Style Sweet Potato Pie

10" unbaked pie shell  
1 medium-sized sweet potato  
1/2 cup real butter  
1 1/2 cups sugar

1 Tbs. flour  
2 tsp. vanilla extract  
3 eggs  
7 oz. can evaporated milk

Bake potato at 350° for 20 minutes (or until done). Remove the skin, and while the potato is hot, mix it with the butter, flour, and vanilla. Add milk, sugar, and eggs and mix well. Pour into the pie shell and bake at 350° for approximately 45 minutes.

**Servings:** 6

—Recipe by **Lucinda Cusic**, Leland, Mississippi



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ana, looked to similar roots in the introduction to *The Cotton Country Collection*:

The plantations along the river and the bayous were almost entirely self-sustaining, raising their own food, making their own clothes, building their homes from the materials in the forests. Plantation chatelaines and their cooks using the unusually lavish gifts of nature and the ideas of many root sources developed a style of cooking distinctive in its heritage and delicious in its nature.

This tradition of hospitality transcends stereotypes of planter aristocracy and the "Old South." Kathy Starr's *Soul of Southern Cooking*, published in the late 1980s, offers the perspective of an African-American homemaker in the Delta.

It was a must that simple foods make a delicious meal. My grandmama, even today, can tell you stories of how proud she felt of her sister, Malinda, who could walk up out of the cotton field, find company sitting on her steps, take a shelf of nothing and make the best meal you ever tasted. There's a long tradition of making good food out of nothing in my family, who have lived in the Mississippi Delta since it was first settled and cleared for growing cotton in the mid-1800s.

The kitchens of the Delta, like the gardens, are similar in many respects. Women in the Delta take pride in setting a generous table and have definite ideas about what is appropriate for a given type of meal. Table settings may vary according to custom and income, but whether a table is set with heirloom silver or an assortment of plastic containers, there will be an abundance of food. Kathy Starr writes about her grandmother's Christmas dinners in Hollandale:

The holiday table is never considered complete if you can't fill up at least one separate table with food [including] baked turkey, baked duck, baked ham, dressing with giblet gravy, potato salad, cranberry sauce, chow-chow, mustard and turnip greens, corn bread, yeast rolls, coconut cake, jelly cake, caramel cake, pecan pies, sweet potato pies, ambrosia and fruit cake.

The women from St. Paul's Episcopal would agree. Their menu for a Christmas dinner includes "baked turkey with oyster dressing, rice with giblet gravy, eggplant casserole, English peas, candied sweet potatoes, cranberry jelly, a tray of homemade pickles and relishes, hot rolls, ambrosia, pecan pie and white fruit cake."

These Delta women of different generations and different races share similar attitudes toward homemaking. Their gardens and kitchens are characterized by abundance. Flower beds and planters are crowded with blooms, tables are loaded with food, decorative elements range from flower arrangements in formal living rooms to bottle trees in rural yards. Much of the social life in the Delta, from garden receptions to house parties to fish fries, is centered in the home. Many of the traditions associated with homemaking in the Delta may appear to have their roots in plantation stereotypes, but when foodways, gardening traditions, and the aesthetics of homemaking are compared across class and race lines, common traits emerge. The lush gardens and highly decorated homes in the Delta embody a need to create a personal space in an impersonal landscape. Traditions and conventions related to homemaking offer a predictable framework for a society in which much depends on the unpredictability of nature.

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