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## **Buttered Biscuits and Delta Dreams**

By Richard Turen

*"When you're in Mississippi, the rest of America doesn't seem real. And when you're in the rest of America, Mississippi doesn't seem real"*

- Bob Parris Moses

The first thing Ray and Ruthie noticed was the deafening roar of the crickets outside room # 22 in the Cedarbluff Motel in Clay County, Mississippi.

It was hot outside, and the chorus of thousands in the Mississippi darkness drowned out the straining of the ancient Amana air conditioner stuck in the bottom half of the window of their room.

Ray and Ruthie left their house in Glen Ellyn yesterday. As they walked out of the airport in Jackson, Ruth remarked that it didn't seem much hotter than its been in Chicago.

This was not a carefully planned summer trip. Ten days before, while half-watching Jerry Springer interview a group of men who were married to men they thought were women, and going through some papers on the kitchen table, Ruthie discovered that her lottery envelope held a winning number. It wasn't the largest lottery prize ever awarded, just \$1.7 million, but Ruthie was smart enough to know that her life would never be exactly the same.

She called Ray at work, and by the time he had driven home from Bell Labs, he knew exactly what he wanted to do. He thought she would agree, being in a great frame of mind, judging by the sound of her voice.

She was. And so Ray and Ruthie flew into Jackson, for a week of rambling back country roads in search of home-cooked food and world-class barbecue, bodacious peach cobblers and grits with butter. It was something that Ray, a lit major from Loyola and a fan of the writer Willie Morris, had always wanted to do. Ruthie thought she'd pick up some recipes and it would be great to have mom watch the kids for a week. As they toured the back roads they could decide what they would do with the money and whether Bell Labs would be shy one engineer come next month.

The drive began the next morning, and within moments they were passing a chain gang out of Starkville Prison working on the shoulder of the two-lane state highway 389.

This trip was a dream come true, because it was an adventure and because, except for copies of "Road Food" by Jane and Michael Stern, they were on their own. They hadn't even bothered to pick up a map. They were off on a search for the perfect biscuit.

They lent me a copy of the diary they kept during this trip and gave me permission to share it with you. Here are some excerpts from their culinary voyage along the back roads of the Delta, along shimmering blacktop framed by farmland and small towns, half boarded up where old-timers sat out in front of the Rexall drug store and remembered when cotten was king:

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*"There might be a lot of reasons to stop in at Stub's in Yazoo City, but we remember just two. The Chicken pot pie was served on a three-part plate with collard greens that were mixed with bacon and hard boiled eggs. and a pear salad. It was served by a waitress who first put her business card on the table and said to call out her name if "y'll need anythin at all". What we needed was the dessert, one of the most famous in the entire Delta, Stubs Chocolate Chess Pie. They served it to us warm, just out of the oven, and I can't adequately describe the smell of layers of chocolate crust encasing baked heavy cocoa pudding. It made me wonder why no one's opened a pie shop in our town."*

\* \* \*

*"We were absolutely shocked when we walked into Lusco's in Greenwood. It was in a kind of poor section of town and was really a run-down grocery store. But we'd heard about it from the locals in towns like Sweatman and Avalon, who swore that this place had the best food in Carroll County.*

*We waited around inside for a while, using the outdoor bathroom and making a call back to Glen Ellyn from the pay phone. Finally, they came to get us and they led us down this narrow hallway to our own private dining room, with a three-quarter length wall and a tin roof. The paint was peeling off the walls.*

*The lone waiter, a distinguished looking black man with a shiny gold tooth, drew aside the chintz curtain and explained that he has a sirloin steak that is "as tender as a mothers love". We ordered steak and pompano, a truly delicate fish. We had a lovely chocolate, walnut, raspberry pie for desert. The waiter smiled when we complimented him on the food and told us that when we got home "you should go get that old movie called The Rievers" He leaned over and whispered in my ear, "they filmed it in Greenwood, and Steve McQueen and Robert Mitchum used to come here near every night. Sat just where you're sitting but they made a mite more noise."*

\* \* \*

*Driving through Indianola and Leland, we couldn't wait to get to Greenville, along the Arkansas border, and home to Doe's Eat Place, a couple of shoddy dining rooms tacked on back of a grocery store that's half falling apart. When we walked in, there were some locals sipping home-made brew from mason jars. We were seated in the kitchen, a big room where you could see all the fresh food being prepared. We had heard that this place had great steaks, so the waitress went to the refrigerator and brought us some huge cuts on butcher paper so we could pick out one we liked. Other folks in the dining room were ordering husks of fresh tamales, filled with hot, mushy spiced cornmeal and finely chopped meat. We were*

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**surprised to find tamales listed as a local specialty but you find them up and down the small towns that border the Mississippi River. As we left Doe's, having had one of the best T-bone steak dinners of our lives, we passed some locals who were picking up some tamales to go, packed in old coffee cans.**

\* \* \*

**Driving through Bear Town and Magnolia to McComb, Mississippi we commented on just how hungry we were. That might be because we were about to have our first round-table dining experience at the legendary Dinner Bell. We had to hurry, keeping an eye out for the Mississippi Patrol because the Dinner Bell only serves lunch and we couldn't afford to be late.**

**Round table dining was invented in the old boarding houses during the war. The food is as southern as you can get. On the day we visited, we were served sensational fried chicken, chicken and dumplings, spackled butter beans, yam casserole with melted marshmallow, black-eyed peas with chunks of country ham, lightly fried okra and fresh country biscuits that steamed when you opened them and sang when you smeared on the butter.. This was all served on a giant lazy susan set in the middle of huge oak tables, filled with all manner of local folk.**

\* \* \*

**In Clarkdale, Mississippi out in Quitman County, we stopped at a simple store called "Abe's" that was famed for its barbecue. Nothing fancy here, plastic utensils and formica tables.. But the hickory-smoked barbecue has been served by Abe's family for more than sixty years. There are two kinds, regular or crispy. The crispy has the fire-blackened crispy edges, the regular is soft, chewy savory meat, ordered most often by the large number of our fellow patrons who we guessed were sporting dentures. The barbecue was served with a huge dollop of tangy baked beans floating with bacon fat and pickled cabbage flavored with brown sugar. The waitress placed two quart jugs of sauce on our table, warning us to keep some lemonade handy if we used "the hot one". There was zero atmosphere - just the way barbecue is meant to be eaten.**

\* \* \*

**It was in Bay Springs, just up highway 18 from Laurel, Mississippi, that we discovered the pie restaurant of our dreams. The Bayless Restaurant is a typical deep south cafe set up on cinderblock and painted a cucumber green. But look inside the kitchen and you'll see a handful of local ladies in white aprons, creating pie after pie from scratch. These are heavy pies, weighing in at several pounds. Our favorite was the coconut filled with more than an inch and a half of custard, shot through with large flakes of fresh sweet coconut meat and topped with a three-inch meringue and a crust you could float on.**

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***We moved on to a slice of hot blueberry out of the oven, criss-crossed with layers of buttered sweet pastry, supporting at least a pound and a half of whole, luscious blueberries. We had nothing but pie for lunch.***

There's more, of course, lots more. And Ray and Ruthie have promised to let me tell you where they'll be going next. The biscuits and the dreamin has only just begun.

(Note: Road Food is published by Alfred A, Knopf)

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