DELTA REVIVAL

ONE MAN'S QUEST TO BOTH RECOVER AND DISCOVER THE BOUNTY OF MISSISSIPPI'S FLOODPLAIN

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STEWART ROBINSON AND CAMERON DINKINS (IN FOREGROUND) LAY COVER FOR A DUCK BLIND

FOR THE FIRST FEW CENTURIES AFTER EUROPEANS ARRIVED IN NORTH AMERICA, THEY CONSIDERED THE MISSISSIPPI DELTA TOO SAVAGE A LANDSCAPE TO SETTLE. "IT WAS FOREST," STEWART ROBINSON SAYS. "LIKE RAINFOREST—TROPICAL, SWAMPS."

THIS PAGE: CLEARED OF CYPRESS YEARS AGO TO MAKE WAY FOR MORE FARMLAND, THIS "DUCK HOLE" BEHIND LINDEN PLANTATION COLLECTS THE RUNOFF FROM 500 ACRES OF SURROUNDING FARMLAND
OPPOSITE PAGE: ROBINSON HARVESTS A CHICKEN OF THE WOODS MUSHROOM

Robinson is eating breakfast with his best friend and business partner, Cameron Dinkins, at a gas station along Lake Washington, a large oxbow that sits three hours south of Memphis. A millennium ago, this was the main channel of the Mississippi; at its northern tip, the lake is just a mile from the big river. It was here that planters eventually made their way into the seemingly impenetrable Delta. In the nineteenth century, soon after Mississippi statehood, wealthy Southern farmers, eager to find big stretches of unsettled land, paddled through bayous and set up homes along the lake's high banks. Slowly, but steadily, the swamps were drained, the river was leveed and the Delta became a cotton kingdom. Now, it's a network of small towns and vast fields, and just a few canebrakes and patches of hardwoods remain.

Robinson, who is a claims adjuster by day, chef and hunting guide the rest of the time, drove down to the lake from Oxford last night to prepare for hunting season. He and Dinkins believe this land needs balance; farms, sure, but also the bounty of the wild. This soil is some of the most productive on Earth, but right now it grows hardly any produce. Instead, commodity crops—corn, cotton, soybeans, rice—are king here, much of it used for animal feed. "The Delta needs farmers. I simply think the land has more to offer," Robinson says. "I'm not going to tell anyone how to do anything, we'd rather put into practice what we believe is right, and hope that others see the benefit."

Robinson is always on the go, always trying to get to the source of things. He's the sort of guy who keeps his eyes peeled when he drives, in case he happens upon, say, a cache of sumac in a highway ditch, which may find its way into a Moscow Mule that evening. He says he sees a great abundance along the edges of these laser-leveled fields. Now he's trying to get the rest of the Delta to see it too.

Growing up, Robinson never could sit still. "All I ever wanted to do was play in the woods." He kept that up with mountain biking, kayaking, and rock climbing. These days his outdoor time is mostly spent hunting.

Born and raised in Jackson, Mississippi, Robinson moved to Alabama in high school. He stayed for college, where he met his wife, Abbie; their two daughters, ages twelve and fifteen, were born in Birmingham. Eventually claims adjusting, a job he chose because it freed him from a desk, carried him back to Mississippi. Based in Oxford, he spends most days on the road, covering territory that encompasses a third of the state.

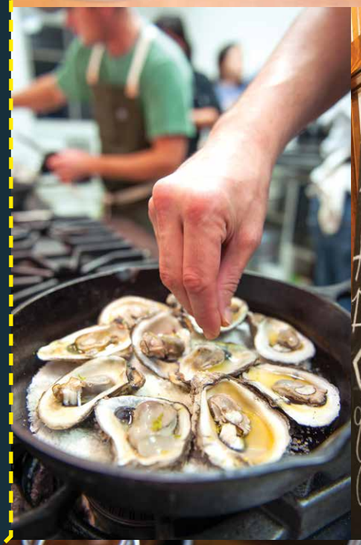
THIS SOIL IS SOME OF THE MOST PRODUCTIVE ON EARTH, BUT RIGHT NOW IT GROWS HARDLY ANY PRODUCE. INSTEAD, COMMODITY CROPS—CORN, COTTON, SOYBEANS, RICE—ARE KING HERE.

Soon after he returned in 2007, Robinson connected with Dinkins. The first time he visited Linden Plantation along the banks of Lake Washington, he was hooked. Robinson had heard legends of the Delta. His grandfather sold wellheads to local farmers and spun yarns about the wild landscape. But he hardly had seen the place himself. "I couldn't believe there was a place this beautiful, and that if you Googled it, there was next to nothing."

Robinson has a bushy beard and a flash to his eye, mischievous but gentle. He makes friends fast. "You meet Stewart, and all of a sudden you're going to stay the weekend with him," says David Crews, a fellow Delta chef. "You're hunting with him, you're best friends with his family." That explains how the visit to Linden grew into so much more. In 2012, Robinson and Dinkins began guiding hunts together under the name Esperanza Outdoors.

Robinson never attended culinary school, but he always had a freezer full of game, which his friends in college were happy to eat. "Everything else came from that," he says. "I just kind of fell in love with the idea of fresh." He spent two years cooking his way through Auguste Escoffier's famous *Le Guide Culinaire,* and befriended local chefs who would let him hang around in their kitchens.

His foraging skills came naturally. To hunt well, he had to read the landscape—to know, for example, what vegetation might attract a duck. And one day, scanning that landscape prompted an aha moment when he recognized a chanterelle mushroom. He's been hooked ever since, and is now a walking encyclopedia. As he and Dinkins trek through the woods, he points out mushrooms, rattling off dishes in which they could be used. "I can't believe stuff like this



DELTA SUPPER CLUB MENU

ROASTED MISSISSIPPI OYSTERS IN BOURBON BROWN BUTTER

FRIED GREEN TOMATOES TOPPED WITH ARUGULA, PEAR, CONFIT TOMATO, PINE NUTS, AND BUTTERMILK DRESSING

ADOBO FRIED CHICKEN WITH THAI CHILI DIPPING SAUCE

OVEN BRAISED BRISKET WITH JEFFERSON'S BOURBON PEACH GLAZE

CAULIFLOWER, OKRA, AND DRIED APRICOTS

COLLARDS AND KIMCHI

SOUTHERN CHESS PIE TOPPED WITH BUTTERMILK BROWN SUGAR AND JEFFERSON'S BOURBON GELATO

has been here my whole life and I never knew about it," Dinkins says. But he is the one that finds the trip's prize: a chicken of the woods, Robinson's favorite mushroom. Back at Linden, he brings out its meaty flavor by sautéing it in butter, garlic, and chicken stock.

Many Deltans would wrinkle their nose at a fungus plucked from a dying tree. This is a rural place with a struggling economy; there are local gourmands, but they battle against culinary parochialism. Despite so many fields, local farmers markets are sparse, often just three or four vendors, and market season lasts just a few months.

It's late October, and a restless Robinson steps out the back doorway of a cramped kitchen. He tells a line cook to drop the tomatoes in the fryer as soon as the oysters are shucked. "You good?" he says. "Still alive? So far so good?" Through a window, they can see seventy diners in button-downs and dresses, dipping corn pone into local honey. They drove in from across the Delta or up from Jackson, eager to revive a supper-club social scene that thrived here a generation ago. Robinson's patter continues as he wheels back inside. "It hasn't gotten real yet," he says. Soon, the first of nine courses will be served.

Last winter, Robinson invited New York chef Tomas Curi to cook for a dinner party at Linden. It was a hit, so Robinson raised his ambitions: he envisioned a series of dinners, pairing out-of-town chefs with historical Delta landmarks. He recruited Chef David Crews, who cooks for two of the best known local hunting camps, and Kimme Hargrove, an account executive with a Delta-based marketing firm, to launch the Delta Supper Club. They quickly found an eager audience. Several hundred people followed the group's Twitter feed within a day.

But tonight it will, as Robinson says, get real. The occasion is a dinner prepared by acclaimed Louisville chef Edward Lee. The setting, Dockery Farms, has a strong claim as the birthplace of the blues.

The Delta knows parties. Frontier journals recount five-day frolics of wine and venison accompanied by troupes of fiddlers. During Prohibition, a senator marveled at the high local price of whiskey. "At last we've found a place where they appreciate the true value of liquor," he said.

Paying for such luxury required big, profitable farms. The plantations here have always exploited land and labor, and the results make environmentalists cringe. In the 1990s, so much fertilizer and pesticides ran into Lake Washington that blue-green algae bloomed. Now, water is being pumped so fast that despite fifty-five inches of annual rainfall, most years the local aquifer is dropping more than a foot.

The dinner party offers subtle hints that other approaches are possible. The menu prominently features local food, from the ubiquitous Delta catfish (flash fried and topped with a delicate jalapeño-mint tartar sauce) to chess pie accompanied by handmade local bourbon-buttermilk gelato. Hors d'oeuvres include fried rice balls and pork belly, procured from two of the only nearby sustainable farms. A caprese salad is made with heirloom cherry tomatoes from outside Jackson. "So many people are talking about how good those cherry tomatoes are," Crews said. "Somebody has taken the time to grow them specially for this area. There's a huge difference in the taste of cherry tomatoes from Kroger or Walmart than from the lady that's growing them in Jackson, Mississippi." His hope is that once diners taste that freshness, it will be hard to go back.

OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: CHEF EDWARD LEE AND ROBINSON PLATE CAULIFLOWER, OKRA, AND DRIED APRICOTS; THAI CHILE DIPPING SAUCE; THE EVENING'S CHALKBOARD MENU; ADOBO FRIED CHICKEN; GUESTS TOAST WITH JEFFERSON BOURBON; GULF OYSTERS **THIS PAGE, TOP TO BOTTOM:** ONE-TIME HOME TO BLUES LEGEND CHARLEY PATTON, THE DOCKERY IS CONSIDERED THE BIRTHPLACE OF THE BLUES (ONE OF THEM ANYWAY); DINKINS AND ROBINSON SCOUT HUNTING LOCATIONS

Whenever he drives down to Linden, Robinson notices a farm. "They've got thirty, forty acres of greens growing," he observes as he and Dinkins are back in the truck, riding to a duck hole. "It looks like arugula, maybe radishes. All kinds of good winter cover." That's rare here, and a nice sign that things can change.

Robinson plans to distribute seed packets of heirloom vegetables at future supper club events. These won't replace the commodity crops—farmers have families to feed and decisions come down to dollars—but he hopes they'll start a small plot of tomatoes or winter kale.

Dinkins, for his part, works hard to balance his farmland with wetlands and woods. On some land, he finds his profits from the hunting company and income from wildlife restoration programs rivals what he'd receive in farm rent. Robinson has noticed more farmland around the Delta being used this way. "Fifteen to twenty years from now, it will be noticeable," he says.

They arrive at the duck blind, sunk in the middle of a swamped field. By mid-winter, it will be mud, Dinkins says. "Mother nature just takes over." A highway runs along its edge; trucks hustle past under a bank of clouds. At afternoon's end, Robinson is mud-spattered and sweat-stained. He has a long drive before he's home to Abbie and his kids. But he slips down into the duck blind. There are spent shells and a half-inch of mud at his feet. Robinson has his eyes turned up to the sky, where, far up, a few ducks arc past. And for the first time I've noticed, he is standing still.