

Edna Lewis as she appeared in a March 24, 1988 article by Phil Audibert in the *Orange County Review*.

Photo by Phil Audibert

day of class she laid the carcass out on a slab, head and innards still attached. She explained how every part of a hog can be used...every part. The aspiring city slicker chefs gawked in horror. "Those people didn't even know that chickens have feet," she whooped indignantly.

One day, when Edna was in her 60s, she slipped in the snow and broke her leg. Bored and hospital-bound, she started to write. The result was *The Edna Lewis Cookbook*, now out of print. Her second effort, however, *The Taste of Country Cooking*, published by Alfred Knopf in 1976, became her seminal masterpiece. And through the recipes she learned from her mother, she wove the stories of her childhood in Freetown.

"A stream filled from the melted snows of winter would flow quietly by us, gurgling softly and gently pulling the leaf of a fern that hung lazily from the side of its bank. After moments of complete exhilaration we would return joyfully to the house for breakfast. Floating out to greet us was the aroma of coffee cooking and meat frying, mingled with the smell of oak

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wood burning in the cookstove. We would wash our hands and take our places on the bench behind the table made for the children." --*The Taste of Country Cooking*, by Edna Lewis
Edna's reputation as an accomplished cook and champion of Southern Cuisine skyrocketed, but it never ever went to her head. She became a regular among other great chefs to be invited to cook a dinner for 1,000 in honor of the late great James Beard, benefiting Meals on Wheels. Robert Mondavi, the California wine magnate, flew her out to prepare lunch for one of his five-day French cooking schools. "It sounds silly to fly to California to make lunch," said an embarrassed Edna at the time, adding, "one of the men sat next to me and said 'I like your food better than the chef's.'" She made tomato soup with basil, broiled oysters, biscuits with homemade preserves.

In the early and mid 1980s, Edna was Executive Chef at Ferrington House, near Chapel

Hill. Later she became a "Chef Consultant," at Middleton Place near Charleston, South Carolina. Her last job as a restaurant cook was in Brooklyn at Gage and Tollner. In 1995, she was awarded an honorary PhD in Culinary Arts from Johnson and Wales University. And most recently she was named a Grande Dame of Les Dames d'Escoffier International, a hallowed worldwide organization of women chefs. But Edna always saw herself as a cook, plain and simple.

Although Edna Lewis lived from New York City to Decatur, Georgia and places in between, she always tried to make it home for revival in August...a week of church-going, music and singing, and of course homemade, homegrown food, served on long makeshift tables underneath the oak trees at Bethel Baptist Church. She and her sisters would work for days preparing ham and fried chicken, green beans, tomatoes so ripe they were still warm from the sun, pound cake, and real lemonade with quartered lemons floating in the stoneware crock. Inside this same church where, in a rising crescendo of words, the minister still calls and the congregation still answers, souls were nourished...outside, bodies replenished.

Revival, she explained, is a homecoming, a renewal, a reaffirmation of one's roots, a confirmation of one's humble beginnings. This past Saturday, there was another such revival...when Edna came home.

"I loved walking barefoot behind my father in the newly ploughed furrow, carefully putting one foot down before the other and pressing it into the warm ploughed earth, so comforting to the soles of my feet." --*The Taste of Country Cooking*, by Edna Lewis



Pallbearers carry Edna Lewis' coffin from Bethel Baptist Church, following an inspiring standing-room-only funeral service this past Saturday. Her body was carried from the church her grandfather helped found in 1892 to the family burial plot near Freetown where she grew up as a child. Edna was preceded in death by her sisters, Jenny and Naomi and her brother, Lue Standley Lewis. She is survived by a sister, Ruth Lewis Smith and a brother, George Lewis.

Photo by Phil Audibert

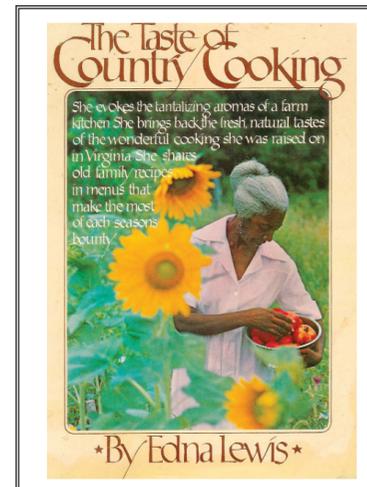


EDNA COMES HOME

It was 1984...summertime. Edna Lewis was sniffing a pear blossom from a tree her forebears probably planted along the footpath to Freetown. She quoted Thomas Wolfe's play, *Look Homeward Angel*. "You can't come home again," she said wistfully. "You can't come home again."

Well last Saturday, in a cruel February wind, she did come home...for the last time. Following a rousing service at the church her grandfather helped found in 1892, Edna Lewis was laid to rest in the family cemetery nearby. She leaves behind a legacy larger than life itself.

Author of at least four cookbooks, hon-



ored by chef's associations and foundations worldwide, restaurant owner, consultant, and most importantly, cook (she didn't like to be called a chef), Edna Lewis may have been the single most important person in this country to give American Southern cooking its rightful place in the world of haute cuisine. Before Edna, it was only French, Italian or Chinese. Since her milestone cookbook *The Taste of Country Cooking*, Southern cooking and its regional offshoot specialties are offered in gourmet restaurants from Oregon to Georgia, Maine to Arizona. She helped give, not just southern cooking, but American cuisine in general, an iden-

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tity to call its own.

Most recently, Edna shared an apartment in Decatur, Georgia with Watershed restaurant owner and chef, Scott Peacock. Known as the Odd Couple of Southern Cooking, they co-penned a final cookbook, *The Gift of Southern Cooking*. In recent years, Edna's bright light had dimmed, and she had become increasingly frail. Early last week, Peacock, who called Edna his mentor, phoned her surviving brother and sister in Lahore, to inform them that Edna, at age 89, had died peacefully in her sleep.

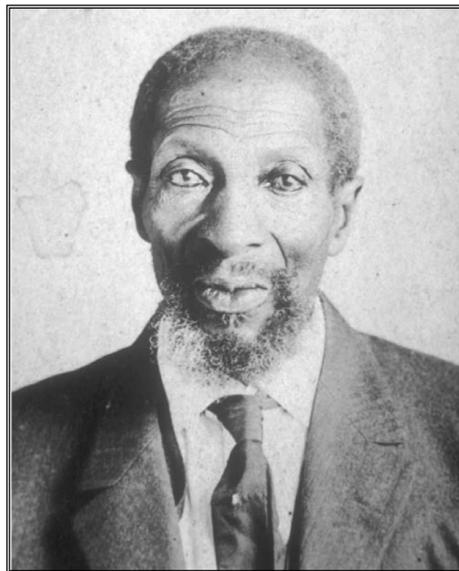
It marks the end of a remarkable journey and life that started in 1916 in a tiny community of 11 families, founded by freed slaves, one of them her grandfather, just up the road from Jackson's Store at Lahore in Orange County. In *The Taste of Country Cooking*, Edna gives us a glimpse of what it was like, growing up a barefoot black girl in Freetown.

"After the long spell of winter, we welcomed the first warm day of February, heralding the coming of spring. Often a mother hen would surprise us with a healthy brood of baby chickens that she had hatched in the hayloft and somehow gotten down to the ground.

They would be chirping and pecking in the snowy slush of the barnyard. We would pick them up and carry them and the mother into the kitchen and place them in a wooden box behind the cookstove." --*The Taste of Country Cooking*, by Edna Lewis

In interviews conducted in the mid and late 1980s, Edna related how grandfather Chester established a school in his living room at Freetown even though he could not read or write himself. She remembered the day he died, when family members "covered all the mirrors; it had something to do with seeing the spirit."

She remembered walking to Jackson's Store in Lahore and marveling at the variety of goods



Chester Lewis, although illiterate himself, had the foresight to establish a school in the living room of his house, above, at Freetown. Lewis, left, a freed slave was Edna Lewis' grandfather. He helped found Freetown, a community of freed slaves, in the 1880's. During its heyday, Freetown was home to 11 families.

On the cover, Edna Lewis sniffs a pear blossom along the footpath to her childhood home, Freetown near Lahore in a photo taken by Phil Audibert in 1984. Published in 1976, *The Taste of Country Cooking* was perfectly timed to spark an identity and respect for American Southern cuisine. Throughout the book, Edna Lewis writes of her childhood memories in Freetown near Lahore in Orange County. At her funeral this past Saturday, Edna's niece, Nina Williams-Mbengue read a passage from the book.

offered. "At that time he sold everything: sugar, mincemeat for pies, shoes and plows and all the seed for the farmers around, Christmas presents, Valentines. They were the center where everyone came to sit around and," she giggled girlishly, "gossip."

She told of an idyllic community, where every adult was a parent to every child. "When children know that people love them and also know that always someone is there, there is less chance of them becoming unruly or disobedient," she said wisely. She talked of people who took care of their own. "If someone fell ill, then the neighbors would go in and milk the cows and feed the chickens and clean the house and cook the food and

come at night and sit up with you. It was great. I never met any other people like them."

But folks move on and times change and Freetown was gradually abandoned, slipping into vine-choked ruin, leaving behind only a chimney, a collapsed roof, the outline of a foundation.

Edna too moved on...to New York City where this shy country girl became something of a radical and did a variety of interesting things from writing for *The Daily Worker* to designing Bonwit Teller's Christmas window displays.

Although it really stems from watching her mother as a child, you might say Edna's official culinary career started in 1948, when she established Café Nicholson with an antique dealer of the same name. Located on Writer's Row, right around the corner from the United Nations, customers included authors Truman Capote, William Faulconer, Tennessee Williams, artist Salvador Dali, playwright Lillian Hellman, actress Rita Hayworth, billionaire Howard Hughes, to name drop just a few. "It was just an artist's hangout," she shrugged.

When she tired of the restaurant, as one often can, she established a 1,500-bird pheasant farm in New Jersey. "It went

real well till all of a sudden one summer I came out of the house and the birds were lying dead all over the place," the victims of some mysterious disease.

She developed her long-standing love of her forebears' culture when she landed a job designing displays in the African Hall of the American Museum of Natural History. And later, she adopted a young Ethiopian man, Afewarke Paulos, as her son.

When asked by a New York cooking school to teach a course in Southern cuisine, she jumped on the train and traveled down to Orange to secure a whole hog from her brother, Lue. The slaughtered pig, packed in ice, rode in the baggage car. The first



At left, pictured, left to right, the Lewis family gathers at a revival picnic at Bethel Baptist Church in August 1984: sister Ruth Lewis Smith, brother Lue Standley Lewis, sister Naomi Lewis Williams, sister Jenny Lewis Ellis, cousin Grace Lewis Johnson and Edna Lewis.

Photo by Phil Audibert

Bottom left, Lewis' third cookbook, *In Pursuit of Flavor*, features recipes she researched while serving as a "Chef Consultant" at Middleton Place near Charleston, SC. "It's not strictly southern," she explained at the time. "The recipes are from all over...the recipes that I like and think have good flavor."

GUESS WHO'S COMING TO DINNER?



In the mid and late 1980's, I had considerable contact with Edna Lewis. She helped me with an oral history/photographic slide program I produced about Freetown, currently gathering dust in the archives of the Orange County Historical Society. A few years later I interviewed Edna again for a feature article about her life that appeared in the *Orange County Review*, March 24, 1988 and was reprinted in a collection of my favorite feature articles of the time, called *Local Folks*.

Edna was a magnificent looking woman, seemingly six feet tall, with long smooth, sinewy copper-colored limbs. She had the biggest and most powerful hands I had ever seen on a woman. She always dressed in her trademark African print dresses and long dangling earrings, and she always tied her snow-white hair back in a neat bun. Her high cheekbones, slightly almond-shaped eyes, bore testimony to the legend that her great-grandmother was full blooded American Indian.

At first, Edna was not easy to interview. Painfully shy, she spoke softly and volunteered little until she felt she could trust you not to exploit her. But she gradually warmed up, especially when

talking about her favorite topic...food. And so she became more than just the topic of an article; she became a friend.

From the very beginning, Edna emphasized the importance of using fresh ingredients in her cooking. "Start with food that is fresh and of course supermarket food is not fresh, so you should grow your own garden," she would advise. She disdained modern conveniences such as food processors and the like and wouldn't touch prepared, processed, or chemically-preserved food. She said convection ovens ruin pastry. She turned up her nose at freezers adding we rely on refrigeration too much. She even distrusted hybrid seeds, saying they produce vegetables that look good, travel well, but taste like cardboard.

So imagine my wife's surprise when I glibly said to her one afternoon, "Guess who's coming to dinner?" Here we are, two 30-somethings trying to cook dinner for the Doyenne of southern cooking, the cookbook author who gave American cuisine an identity, the champion of fresh ingredients!

In those days Susie and I were doing more in the way of being self-sufficient than we do now. We were working an

active farm, and had a garden, a pen full of laying hens and a milk cow from whom we actually occasionally hand-churned butter. So we weren't living totally in the culinary Dark Ages, and we would definitely not have to run out to Kentucky Fried or haul out a Stouffers to feed Edna Lewis. But still...the pressure was on.

I remember fetching Edna from her sister Jenny's house near Lahore (Edna never drove). Back at our farm, we took her for a ride around the fields in an old farm wagon, towed by Ned our erstwhile draft horse. Edna loved it, even taking the reins herself. That grin on her face and that faraway look in her eyes was a dead giveaway that she was back in Freetown as a little girl.

Before dinner, I offered and she readily accepted a tumbler full of bourbon...neat. We served her locally shot venison, marinated in lemon juice, juniper berries and red wine. For dessert we served wild black raspberry cobbler. She loved it.

We loved her, for we had never been made to feel so at ease in the presence of someone so great and so unassuming and unpretentious.

--Phil Audibert