

The Southern Fried Funeral
[Edited Transcript]

A Sermon by Kim Lynn
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An elderly man was at home, dying in bed. He smelled the aroma of his favorite chocolate chip cookies baking. He wanted one last cookie before he died.

He fell out of bed, crawled to the landing, rolled down the stairs, and dragged himself into the kitchen, where his wife was busy baking cookies. With his strength waning, he made it to the table and was just barely able to lift his trembling arm to the cookie rack.

As he grasped a warm, moist chocolate chip cookie, his wife suddenly whacked his hand with a spatula.

“Why?” he whispered. “Why did you do that?”

His wife said, “They’re for the funeral!”

Some of you may remember back in November of 2000 when I was up here delivering a message entitled, “Sacred Cows, Keeping Kosher, and Nectar of the Gods: Food and Spiritual Practice”. At that time, I indicated I might do a follow-on, and now, some three and a half years later, here it is, The Southern Fried Funeral: the second in a very irregular series on how we as human beings incorporate food into the rituals of our personal and communal lives.

But first, in the interest of full disclosure, I must state up front that I am NOT a “Southerner”. Although I was born in Southern California, I have been told categorically that that does not even remotely qualify. Having said that, however, I have now spent the majority of my adult life in Middle Georgia, married a Macon-born, Warner Robins-raised native son, and, if nothing else, have embraced the cuisine of the region wholeheartedly. My mother-in-law frequently comments that, ‘For someone not born here, you sure do eat like you were!’ Collards, hoppin’ john, boiled peanuts, even okra, and not just the fried kind either. I’m talking about the slimy kind, with tomatoes, that even the aforementioned to-the-region-born husband won’t touch with a ten-foot spoon.

If you saw the newsletter announcing today’s topic of The Southern Fried Funeral, you might have said, “My, how intriguing!”, but I suspect the initial reaction for most was “Eeeeew”. Of course, my intent was to pique your interest, but the idea for a message on this subject came to me as I was reading the book, Consuming Passions: A Food-Obsessed Life, by Michael Lee West. In a chapter titled, appropriately enough, Funeral Food, Ms West writes, “When you bring food to a neighbor or friend, you are wisely letting the food fill in the gaps. Sometimes we say all the wrong things, but food knows all languages. It says, I know you are inconsolable. I know you are fragile right now. And I am so sorry for your loss. I am here if you need me. The bringing of food has no denomination and no race. It is concern and sympathy in a Pyrex bowl. In the kindest sort of way, it reminds us that life continues, that we must sustain and nourish it. Funeral cuisine may be an old custom, but it is humanity at its finest.”

I was so moved by that passage, I felt it had to be shared. I then began doing some research, and found a considerable amount of information on the subject – some humorous, some profound, but all, I hope, “intriguing”.

Recorded history indicates that the custom of feasting as a part of funeral rites goes back as far as ancient Egypt, where both kings and commoners got elaborate send-offs into the next world. In ancient Greece, before mourners could begin feasting, they had to not only thank the gods and goddesses for the food on the table, but appease them as well by leaving wine and water by the side the newly-dug grave. For the Celtic celebration of Samhain (Saw-when), three days’ worth of keening, a type of wailing chant alternating with praise for the dead, was followed by four days’ dancing and singing where families placed a bowl of food on the chest of the loved one so he or she wouldn’t feel left out. Perhaps the most well-known elaborate modern-day tradition occurs in Mexico on November 2nd, All Soul’s Day or The Day of the Dead. Families place favorite food items of the departed on an altar at the gravesite, and bakeries and candy companies turn out huge quantities of cakes and candies in the shape of skulls, coffins, and skeletons. While in ancient ritual food was frequently offered to the departed to accompany them on their journey into the next world, our more relatively recent attentions are

directed at the living. Practical considerations then and now necessitate feeding those who have traveled great distances, and “bringing something by” not only eases the burden of hospitality for the family, it promotes community in the original sense of the word. As the late food writer Jeff Smith said, “[In Biblical times] the table was the place for celebration of all pacts, promises, and real intimacy...eating together was the fullest and most important symbol of intimate sharing.”

Ethnic groups define themselves on the basis of shared history and culture, and one important aspect is food. Within that context, the Southern funeral is truly a defining moment. As Debbie Moose writes in her essay, *The Bounty at the Mourner’s Table*, “Southerners aren’t the only people who take food to the homes of the bereaved, but they have held up the practice for a very long time and at a level of abundance that brings tears to the eyes. I believe that providing sustenance at a time of loss has a special place in this part of the world.” And according to Angie Gillaspie, Southern women know that a handmade ham biscuit and a slice of pie will comfort your spirit today, and a foil-wrapped casserole in your freezer will console you later.

Of course, like everything else about Southern culture, there are esoteric and unwritten “rules” (and occasional exceptions) about funeral food that are not easily discerned by outsiders. Food should be homemade, although there is some concern that the “younger generation” doesn’t abide by this rule, opting instead for deli platters from the local megamart. But then, playwright Linda Byrd Killian writes, “My age group, on occasion, has stopped and gotten the Colonel’s bucket. The difference is, we had the good grace and class to place the chicken on our own cut-glass platters. You would never have seen us blatantly walk in with a cardboard bucket or plastic deli tray. No sir, we use our best serving dishes for those items, and will, if asked, give out the recipes.” And this from a church newsletter: “Last month I attended my third funeral in six months. As the service wrapped up, my intention was to head straight home, but then I thought of how fortified my weary and sad body would be with one of those traditional after the service ham sandwiches, a lemon bar and a good cup of church coffee. I lingered over a piece of cake and a second cup of coffee, watching the church ladies...circulate around the hall...carrying trays of sandwiches...replenishing the carafes of coffee and clearing plates as mourners finished up. I’m sure not one of them was younger than seventy. It occurred to me that at the two previous funerals, the food had not been very good. At least, not by my funeral food standards...[more like] school potluck fare. There is something very comforting about good funeral food and all those lovely women who serve punch or coffee and make sure the food’s plentiful. The next generation is apparently choosing other things to do besides learning the art of making large quantities of comfort food and serving it with special kindness at funerals. I’ve never mastered a good casserole, but I think it’s time I learn. I hope my contemporaries will, too. Before it’s too late. The reason funeral food tastes so good is because it’s prepared with love and kindness. And that’s something that should never be endangered.”

As just mentioned, there are funeral food standards, as well as the rules: this from a cooking forum posting - “A long-time neighbor died and his funeral was this morning. The food was pretty boring. Ham sandwiches, pickles, potato chips (no serving tongs, - just dig in), some weird vegetable salad with canned veggies and not much flavor...Man, before I croak, I gotta make sure that somebody makes a better plan than that for my funeral party.”

But back to the rules. Funeral food must be transportable, and reheatable. Vegetables occasionally appear alone, as in a crock pot of green beans, but really should be baked in a tasteful casserole; those same green beans with mushroom soup and Durkee’s french fried onions, or perhaps macaroni and cheese (Steve assures me macaroni and cheese is a vegetable because it’s found on the salad bar), macaroni and cheese with tuna with crushed Lay’s potato chips on top. But spicy food is not a good idea under the circumstances; your world-famous chili might cause reflux, which, in someone’s stressed state, could be confused with angina. And while at first glance, baked beans might seem to fit the bill of transportability and ease of preparation, as well as being nearly universally liked, the effect on the digestive system of the bereaved, especially in the confines of a small room of a funeral parlor; well, you get the idea...

Since Southern cooks bring out their specialties when doing desserts, you know that there will be “a bounty at the mourner’s table” - pound cake, coconut cake, pecan pie, and lemon chess, which is sometimes called funeral pie. Elizabeth Schatz’ essay, *Passing and Repasting*, is about returning to Ripley, Mississippi for her grandmother’s funeral. In recalling the ladies of the Methodist church who brought desserts, “...a dizzying array of pies [that] warranted its own table” in the fellowship hall, she writes, “Something about a slice of chocolate cream pie, handed over by the powdery, wrinkled hand of an old friend with a story about ‘How wonderfully

that grandmother of yours used to bake,' simply heals the soul." And Michael Lee West's mother used to say that a lemon square, served with a cup of hot tea, revives the spirit – it's cheerful and soul-lifting; the culinary equivalent of spending time on a sunporch.

But you do need know your audience, so to speak. Pina Colada cake or bourbon balls are probably not appropriate for a Baptist funeral. And this is not, I repeat, not the time to show off your Better Than Sex cake or Death by Chocolate.

Another staple of Southern cuisine and culture that finds its way to funerals is pimento cheese. Dorner Carmichael tells how her late mother used to say that one of the things a Southern woman is judged by, is the quality of her pimento cheese. You may have noticed that I just revealed my outsider status again, since I enunciated the vowels, pronounced the "t", and didn't add an "r" to pimento. I understand that perminna, puhminna, minna and minnow are some of the acceptable pronunciations here. In Fred Sauceman's essay, Pimento Cheese: In Some Cases It's Pure Heaven, he describes the pimento cheese made by Ella Hughes Griffin Slides of Coffeerville, Mississippi. It's completely blended, not chunky as some others are, and is the color of the orange-yellow crayon in the 64-count box of Crayolas. Ella's niece, Nan Davis, said that when other people brought casseroles for funeral food, Ella brought huge platters of pimento cheese sandwiches. And, talk about standards: Ella had standards. Since her recipe included homemade mayonnaise, she advised her niece, "If you're not going to make the mayonnaise, you might as well not even bother – just go to the store and buy Mrs. Weaver's". At Ella's eulogy several years ago, the minister said he didn't know who had been making the pimento cheese sandwiches in heaven before her, but they were going to have to move over because Ella was in charge now.

And finally, you can't talk about funeral food in the South without a specific mention of fried chicken. Medical science tells us that of the five senses, smell is the one most closely associated with memory. I'm sure many of you recall stepping into the kitchen of a home or fellowship hall after a memorial service, and the first aroma to waft over you was fried chicken. John Egerton is a food writer and editor of Cornbread Nation, a series of anthologies published by the Southern Foodways Alliance, part of the University of Mississippi, Steve and I met John when he was part of a discussion panel at the Mid-South District Annual meeting in Nashville last year. In devoting an entire essay to "the Gospel bird", John writes, "What makes fried chicken so special in the South – the real importance of it, the immortality of Southern fried chicken - is all tied up in tradition and memories. In the early forties, practically every family I knew in my small-town Kentucky youth raised chickens for eggs and meat...but as familiar as fried chicken was to us, it was not your everyday fare; it was special. You served it to company, to the minister, to out of town guests. It was for family reunions and summer wedding parties and church dinners. It was funeral food, a personally delivered platter that bespoke sympathy, sorrow, and respect...I was fortunate enough to end up with the big, deep, heavy cast-iron skillet and lid [with which my mother] produced all those poultry masterpieces a half-century ago. There is a reassuring comfort in the knowledge that this utensil will never wear out, never lose flavor, never fail. It is an heirloom worth its weight in silver or gold, and as much to be treasured as a fine old piece of furniture and as prized as a precious memory."

In the Book of Common Prayer, Burial of the Dead, First Anthem, we find the phrase, "In the midst of life we are in death", but, as the custom of funeral food demonstrates, in the midst of death we are also in life. For those left behind, the communal ritual of funeral food is part of the healing process. For the givers, it is a way to share in the sorrow, to be intimate without being intrusive, and to affirm that life does, indeed, go on.

I will close with the words of Jill Connor Browne, these from her book *The Sweet Potato Queens' Book of Love*, "We like to think that death has its advantages for the departed one: journey's end, sweet chariots, unbroken circles. For everyone left behind, there is the unmistakable comfort of funeral food. When there is a death in a Southern town, everyone who has ever known anybody in the family has to take food to the home of the bereaved. It's practically a law. There was a lady in one town who got up every morning and fried a chicken, just in case. Even the most anguished, devoted family member can find some shred of consolation in funeral food. If there's a balm in Gilead, I'm willing to bet it's made with cream of mushroom soup, Velveeta, or Cool Whip." Amen to that.

Sources:

Jill Connor Browne cooking-forum.com John Egerton

Angie Gillaspie Dory Hudspeth Lynda Byrd Killian
Debbie Moose Rana's blog Lisa Rogak
Elizabeth Schatz E. Joan Sims Terre Thomas
Michael Lee West