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## Book Review: The Lost Southern Chefs: A History of Commercial Dining in the Nineteenth-Century South

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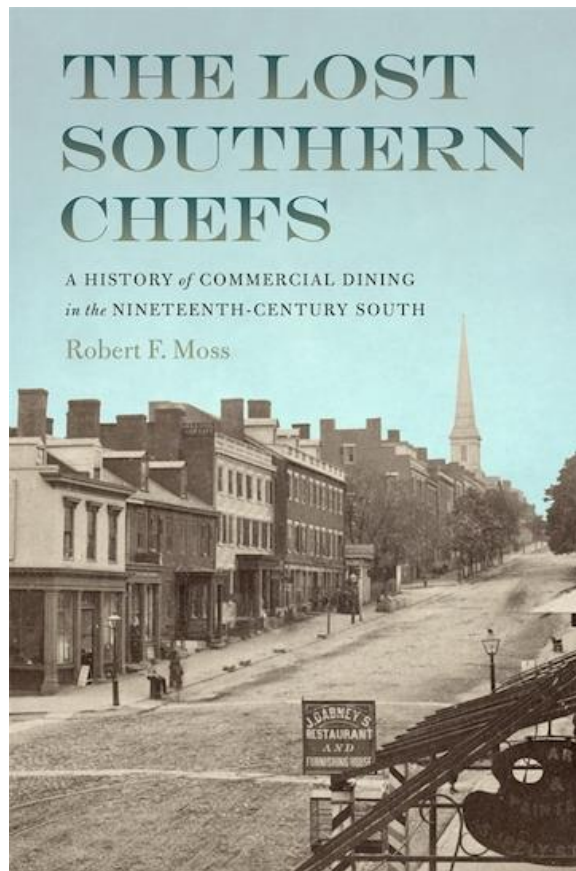
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## Off the SHELF

**The Lost Southern Chefs: A History of Commercial Dining in the Nineteenth-Century South** by Robert Moss (University of Georgia Press, 2022; ISBN 9780820360850; \$27.95)

There is no shortage of research and writing on the topic of Southern food. Considering that the South in the 19th century was largely rural, it follows that most discussions around this topic have focused on the ingredients, recipes, and foodways of the farm and plantation house, including the contributions brought from the home cultures of enslaved peoples. In his new book, *The Lost Southern Chefs: A History of Commercial Dining in the Nineteenth-Century South*, culinary historian and food writer Robert Moss turns his attention to uncovering the stories of commercial food and dining practices in the urban South and the culinary professionals who created and sustained them—before, during, and after the Civil War.



*Image courtesy of the publisher*

The commercial dining sector of the economy was in great flux in the early part of the 19th century. The boardinghouses, taverns, and inns of the colonial period were gradually giving way to more sophisticated forms of public food consumption: pastry shops, coffeehouses, hotels, and oyster houses. In contrast to the world of Southern home cookery, which was thoroughly influenced by the flavors and techniques of African foodways, commercial

cuisine in this era was of a different type. By the 1850s, there was an extensive procurement network for food items, whether canvasback ducks from the Chesapeake, oysters from the Gulf, or fresh game from west of the Mississippi River. Moss describes how urban entrepreneurs in these networks contributed to the creation of a typical fine dining menu that might bring together thoroughly American foods, such as green terrapin, with fine European imports like Madeira wine. These fine dining menus became somewhat standardized during this period, so travelers and businessmen could expect to see little variation in what was available from New Orleans and Charleston to Boston and New York.

Focusing on the urban centers of Charleston, Richmond, Louisville, New Orleans, and Washington, DC, Moss reconstructs the lives and fortunes of several caterers and chefs who were central players in a Southern commercial culinary past that has seldom before been a historical focus. This group, mostly consisting of recent European immigrants and free men and women of color, who made and lost fortunes in commercial hospitality throughout the 19th

century, had little of their lives captured in the historical records. By combing newspaper ads, city directory entries, and court records, Moss has been able to construct a vivid picture of the vibrant, sophisticated, and cosmopolitan world of Southern fine dining.

This lively and engaging look at a fascinating and little researched topic is recommended for undergraduate and graduate courses of study involving 19th century business practices and

culinary history. It is also an illuminating look at the professional lives of African Americans, enslaved and free, during this period, and how post-Reconstruction efforts to assert and romanticize the myth of the Lost Cause served to conceal the labor and fortunes of these commercial pioneers.

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