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## Grain and Fire: A History of Baking in the American South

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*Anthropologist*, in 2004, described the two earlier books as ‘canonical’ and ‘landmark studies,’ consigning the Davis and Gardner book to the footnotes” (p. xviii).

The *Deep South* study covered a longer period of time and was more detailed. The researchers sought to document the social structure that showed the “systematic subordination of Negroes to the whites and the exclusion of Negroes from any participation with whites that implied equality” (p. 271). Because of these unwritten rules, it was essential that the authors had both Blacks and Whites doing the research. Blacks would not be able to interview the Whites who ran the city, and the Blacks would not be comfortable being interviewed by Whites about their dissatisfaction with their subordinate status.

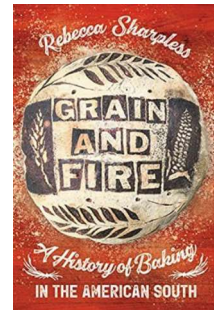
It seems as if the authors suffered from the same prejudices as those they were researching. Was it because the lead researchers were Black that their work did not receive lasting prominence? Lewis W. Jones, a reviewer of the original publication of *Deep South*, pointed out in his review that the research team consisted of two Whites and three Blacks, emphasizing division of race versus the importance of the study. *Deep South* is currently being reassessed, and many scholars today believe it is a seminal study that details the deeply embedded racism that was part of everyday life in the Jim Crow era.

One of the more remarkable facts about *Deep South* is the degree of danger in which the Black researchers put themselves. Allison and Elizabeth Davis “chose to make the personal sacrifice and to risk their lives for the greater good of documenting the structure of human division, a mission that would practically render them double agents” (p. xiv). *Deep South* still has important things to say about the role of race and racism in the United States—for those who are willing to listen. This new edition of *Deep South* is recommended for all academic libraries.

Chris Andrews, University of North Georgia

### ***Grain and Fire: A History of Baking in the American South***

Rebecca Sharpless  
Chapel Hill: The University of  
North Carolina Press, 2022  
ISBN: 9781469668369  
344 p. \$30.00 (Hbk)



In this superlative work of food history, Rebecca Sharpless recounts the American South’s rich baking heritage from the nut and root breads of the region’s early indigenous peoples to contemporary creations of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This book does not simply chronicle the emergence and evolution of popular breads, cakes, pies, and other southern baked goods but ultimately provides a social history of the region through the lens of its distinctive baking traditions. As Sharpless notes, “By way of grain and fire, this history of southern baking kindles the broader history of the South and its people” (p. 2).

The book is organized chronologically into eight chapters and a brief afterword, each representing different eras that examine the social and culinary developments that have shaped and defined southern baking over time. Far from linear, *Grain and Fire* is a layered study that examines how the South’s baking history was influenced by major events (such as European colonization and the Civil War), demographics (namely, race, gender, social class, national origin, and urban/rural environments), and transformations in technology, transportation, and commercialization. Furthermore, readers learn the origins of iconic southern baking brands like Martha White and Little Debbie, examine the role of baked goods in local food festivals and contests, and gain a limited appreciation for how southern baking has influenced popular culture, particularly as a source of inspiration for country music lyrics and the Montgomery Biscuits baseball team name.

One of the many challenges historians face when reconstructing any regional or national history is delineating discernible, overarching patterns without overgeneralizing or neglecting unique developments within minoritized communities that do not reinforce the general narrative. Sharpless skillfully balances these considerations by noting nuances and exceptions whenever nec-

essary without losing sight of the broader trajectory of her study. Significantly, she also avoids the common pitfall of treating the South like a peculiar place that exists in a vacuum impervious to outside forces. Throughout the book, readers learn how diverse immigrant groups have contributed to the region's culinary history with traditional baked goods from their homelands. Arguably the most surprising revelation of *Grain and Fire* is that some dishes southerners cherish, such as pumpkin pie, originated in the North before they were adopted by southern bakers as their own.

This previous point underscores the paramount question Sharpless raises in the introduction: "Is there really such a thing as southern baking?" (p. 2). As the result of numerous social changes that transformed society between the Civil War and the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the South's distinctive baking culture gradually assimilated into the nation's increasingly homogenized and commercialized lifestyle. Though some features like cornbread persist, *Grain and Fire's* sweeping narrative demonstrates that the South's baking culture has never been static. Rather, it has drastically evolved over the past 500 years and will continue to do so. Sharpless ultimately concludes that southern bakers, both past and present, determine through their own agency which breads and desserts belong to this culture.

The greatest attribute of *Grain and Fire* is the sheer breadth and depth of the research that informs it. Collectively, the notes and bibliography sections comprise a quarter of the volume. In addition to consulting numerous traditional resources (newspapers, published primary sources, theses and dissertations, government documents, and secondary sources, for example), Sharpless also availed herself of various unconventional, but relevant resources such as patents, websites, scores of cookbooks, and *Southern Living* magazine. The finished product is a consummate history far more enriched by this diverse range of sources.

There is, however, one minor criticism of *Grain and Fire*. Sharpless regrettably does not define the geographic scope of "the South" for her readers beyond vaguely distinguishing the region from the rest of the continent as the historic hotbed of conflict between Native American, European, and African peoples. As thought-provoking as this interpretation is, it does not address the pub-

lic's varying perceptions of the region's reach. Though no one questions that Deep South states like Alabama and Mississippi are a part of the region, opinions differ regarding borderline states such as Maryland or Oklahoma. While references to developments in St. Joseph, MO, the Chesapeake Bay region, Miami, and Texas ultimately reveal the author's expansive scope, clearly defining her interpretation of "the South" in geographic terms at the beginning would have preempted this ambiguity for readers from the start.

This concern, however, does not detract from the quality of this book. Rebecca Sharpless has not only written a masterful history of southern baking but has arguably published the definitive work on the subject. *Grain and Fire: A History of Baking in the American South* will serve as the crucial starting point for researchers investigating any aspect of this rich heritage. Sharpless' study is not only a worthy addition to the growing field of food history scholarship, but a testament to the exciting potential foodways research offers in reshaping our understanding of the past.

This engaging monograph is highly recommended for all readers. Academic libraries, particularly those with southern history or foodways collections, should consider adding this title to their stacks. Southern reviewers especially, both scholars and general readers alike, will have a newfound appreciation for cornbread, biscuits, layer cakes, and other staples they have long enjoyed but taken for granted without knowing the story behind the cherished foods that have nourished the region's inhabitants for generations.

A. Blake Denton, University of Southern Mississippi

### ***Freedom's Dominion: A Saga of White Resistance to Federal Power***

Jefferson Cowie  
New York: Basic Books, 2023  
ISBN: 9781541672802  
512 p. \$35.00 (Hbk)

If one wants to understand the antipathy held by generations of White Southerners toward the federal government, Jefferson Cowie's *Freedom's Dominion: A Saga of*

