

Review of:

Vinegar & Char: Verse from the Southern Foodways Alliance

Edited by Sandra Beasley. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2018. Pp. i + 109, foreword, introduction, contributor notes, illustrations.

Review by: Sarah T. Shultz

Vinegar & Char is an anthology of verse about Southern food. The volume commemorates the twentieth anniversary of the Southern Foodways Alliance (SFA), an academic organization that studies and documents the various foods and food cultures of the American South. Since poetry is a subjective medium not every line in the collection will speak to each reader, however these works illuminate the spectrum of human experiences in the American South using foodways as a prism. Some poems use a combination of lyricism and contrast to capture the feeling of experiencing the agricultural past and more industrialized present of the region simultaneously, while others focus on sensory details to illustrate how taste and texture connect us to specific moments.

In the Introduction, editor Sandra Beasley suggests that the goals of SFA, and by extension of the collection, are to widen ideas of what constitutes Southern food, and approach the subject with respect and an eye towards acknowledging and bridging economic, racial, and ethnic divides that have long characterized the region. Ralph W. Eubanks builds on these ideas in the Foreword, identifying grappling with history without falling into oversimplified nostalgia as a major concern of the collection.

If the two major goals of *Vinegar & Char* are to create a more inclusive, multivocal South, and to simultaneously celebrate the pleasures and confront the pains of its past without oversimplifying either dimension, it succeeds in meeting these goals. While it would be impossible to represent every lived experience of the American South today in this collection, Beasley has put together a truly dynamic, nuanced portrait of the South that acknowledges both its past and present diversity. Despite the slimness of the volume, there is ample space in these pages for fond looks back at family and community traditions, honest critiques of slavery, intolerance, and economic inequality, and many other perspectives that fall along this spectrum. However, the absence of context for the poems or information about how or why they were selected could present difficulties for readers looking to use this book as a primary research source. The poems are organized into three sections, but there is very little information given on how specific poems were chosen beyond the fact that many have been previously featured in SFA publications. There is no discussion of how the themes were chosen and organized.

Section I explores the gathering and preparation of Southern food. Processing food for consumption is explored on an individual, intimate scale, in the shucking of an oyster or the slaughtering of a pig, as well as within the larger historical and social contexts of slavery and migrant labor. Section II investigates the connection between food and relationships. The poems use food as a metaphor to explore romantic love, friendship, family ties, employee and employer relationships, small and large communities, and the

connections between humans and the natural world. Because relationships take center stage in this section, the food itself occasionally fades into the background. While this slipping in and out of focus is an accurate representation of food's place in Southern culture, readers interested in exploring its symbolic functions in Southern daily life and history may find this section less fruitful for analysis. The poems of Section III are concerned with the different ways that food connects people with one another. While some entries celebrate these connections, others test the limits of food's ability to create a sense of *communitas* by illuminating food's role in systems of inequality.

The Contributor Notes section could be an excellent resource for scholars looking for contemporary works of poetry dealing with foodways of the American South. But if there were also a section in which more context was provided on the content of the poems and their intended purpose within the collection as a whole, it might prove helpful for researchers working on long-term projects or professors looking to integrate these verses into syllabi for food studies courses. The collection may not be a perfect resource for foodways scholars, but its entries can be used in a number of ways. Specific poems could be paired with scholarly sources to provide a more varied learning experience for students in introductory foodways courses, for example; researchers doing fieldwork on Southern foodways could share poems from the collection with interviewees to facilitate discussion.

While *Vinegar & Char* may present certain challenges for foodways scholars looking to integrate it into research projects or course curricula, as a collection of poetry it soars. The poems illustrate various ways in which food, frequently characterized as everyday and trivial, can inspire a lyrical response. Food inspires poetry because it is linked to memory, identity, and the landscapes we inhabit and dream about. The works selected in *Vinegar & Char* depict the South beautifully and realistically. There is something here for everyone who is interested in the connections between food, place, and identity.