



PROJECT MUSE®

---

*A Mess of Greens: Southern Gender and Southern Food* by  
Elizabeth S. D. Engelhardt, and: *Stirring the Pot: The  
Kitchen and Domesticity in the Fiction of Southern Women* by  
Laura Sloan Patterson (review)

David A. Davis

Mississippi Quarterly, Volume 65, Number 2, Spring 2012, pp. 333-336 (Review)

Mississippi  
Quarterly

The Journal  
Of Southern Culture

Edited by O'Grady Keenan,  
William Paul Brinkley, Charles  
and Katherine

Vol. 65, No. 2 Spring 2012

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mss.2012.0018>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/740954/summary>

no admirer from owning it, and it would make a lovely gift. Cheers to Kelly Gerald and to all who aided her.

*University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*

*Joseph M. Flora*

*A Mess of Greens: Southern Gender and Southern Food*, by Elizabeth S. D. Engelhardt. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011. 248 pp. \$69.95 cloth, \$24.95 paper, \$24.95 ebook.

*Stirring the Pot: The Kitchen and Domesticity in the Fiction of Southern Women*, by Laura Sloan Patterson. Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co., 2008. 240 pp. \$39.95 paper.

FOOD AND THE KITCHEN ARE NOT QUITE NEW TOPICS IN SOUTHERN LITERARY criticism. A special issue of the *Southern Quarterly* edited by Peggy Prenshaw in 1992 contained important essays by Patricia Yaeger, Minrose Gwin, Mary Ann Wimsatt, and other critics that set the terms for recent discussions of food and literature. Foodways studies have developed over the past few decades as an area of inquiry within both the social sciences and the humanities with a distinct interdisciplinary methodology that uses food to examine social organization and cultural values. More recently, Southern food has taken on scholarly significance as the focus of the Southern Foodways Alliance based at the University of Mississippi and as the subject of several cultural studies. Critical works have emerged in the past few years that incorporate the methods of foodways study into the analysis of Southern texts, such as Psyche Williams-Forsen's *Building Houses out of Chicken Legs* and Andrew Warnes's *Savage Barbecue*. *A Mess of Greens: Southern Gender and Southern Food*, by Elizabeth Engelhardt, and *Stirring the Pot: The Kitchen and Domesticity in the Fiction of Southern Women*, by Laura Sloan Patterson, combine foodways analysis with feminist theory to develop nuanced and revealing interpretations of twentieth-century women's novels and, perhaps more importantly, Southern women's lives.

Elizabeth Engelhardt begins *A Mess of Greens* with an extended meditation on an idealized Southern meal from her childhood, a memory based on summers spent with her family in the North Carolina mountains, where fresh tomatoes, fried chicken, potato salad, and homemade peach ice cream covered picnic tables. Her nostalgia gives

way, though, to an interrogation of regional definitions, normative gender roles, and food preparation technology. This shift from imagination to analysis is crucial to her text because, as she explains, “people talk about food even when they are not intending to—in letters, diaries, photographs, novels, short stories, and poems—and they talk about themselves when they intend to talk about food—in advertising, recipes, advice manuals, and cookbooks” (15). She uses feminist theory and interdisciplinary American studies methods both to further this conversation and to examine the conversation itself, which reveals the relations of power inherent in food as a form of social relations.

Engelhardt makes her argument by examining some specific instances when food was the subject of social discord. For much of Southern history, for example, cornbread in its various incarnations was the region’s staple food, but in the early twentieth century, it was the subject of class antagonism. During the progressive era, a group of college-educated women promoted the use of white flour for sliced bread, biscuits, and beaten biscuits as a sign of improved hygiene and elevated morals, thereby projecting negative associations onto cornbread. Thus, an item as innocuous and commonplace as corn pone became a signifier of social class. Another group of women activists developed tomato clubs to empower young women by teaching them to grow, can, and market tomatoes from their family gardens, encouraging them to develop entrepreneurial skills and financial agency. In addition to these uplift movements, Engelhardt also explores the role of pellagra in novels about the Southern textile industry. In the early 1900s, the South experienced an epidemic of pellagra, a sometimes fatal nutritional deficiency that makes its sufferers listless and irrational. She describes the disease’s resonance in novels by Olive Tilford Dargan, Grace Lumpkin, Myra Page, and Marie Van Vorst, and she argues that “in the radical or social activist mill stories, the grotesque pellagrins triggers a class awakening for working-class characters and readers who identify with them” (161).

*A Mess of Greens* approaches an extremely fertile topic, and it offers a flexible methodology for examining the relations between food and women in Southern texts. Engelhardt attempts to develop an *écriture féminine* of Southern food that will reveal “what divided us, how we defined ourselves, who was excluded and why, what we wished to change, and what we wished to forget. Just as the 1970s feminists suggested, much of what we say when we are talking about food is

communicated without words” (203). Discovering what is not said requires significant historical context, and Engelhardt’s book demonstrates that potential for archival research coupled with a nimble theoretical framework to illuminate our understanding of the complex relations among food, women, and Southern writing.

Laura Sloan Patterson shifts the focus from food to the kitchen in *Stirring the Pot*. She argues that “the home, and its nexus, the kitchen, operates not only as a physical space, but also as an ideological tool for investigating larger cultural and historical issues” (3). Her text ranges widely to discuss a broad spectrum of topics related to the kitchen as a site of domesticity, femininity, sexuality, and technology. She sees that the domestic space in novels by Southern women responds to the same range of social and historical events that influence texts by male authors. Novels set in the domestic space, in her estimation, can be radical.

Patterson makes her argument by juxtaposing social events with the lives and writings of Southern women authors. In the case of Ellen Glasgow, she uses Glasgow’s deafness to make a case for social detachment as a means of social criticism, and she extends the idea to suggest that domesticity and rigidly-defined gender roles are a form of disability. Eudora Welty, according to Patterson, challenges the boundaries of female agency by embracing transgressive sexuality. Patterson uses the sexology movement, the scientific study of human sexuality that revolutionized understandings of normal human behavior, to explain that *Delta Wedding* depicts the dismantling of the sexual purity myth. Patterson shows particular interest in the effects of technology on gender roles. Lee Smith’s novels, for example, show how the penetration of railroads into rural Appalachia changed the conditions of women’s everyday lives by offering both mobility and access to consumer goods and industries from outside the region. Beyond Appalachia, technologies have emerged over the past century that, as Patterson explains, have both expanded and contracted the domestic space. Machines, frozen dinners, and cookbooks have reduced the tedious labor of domesticity. As for the Internet, it has simultaneously erased and reinforced the boundaries that surround women who work in the home by making the boundaries more porous in a virtual sense but more rigid in a physical sense: by reducing the necessity of leaving the home, the Internet actually can heighten a sense of entrapment.

Patterson's overarching idea that events in the public sphere influence the domestic sphere has genuine merit, and some of her contentions are compelling, particularly her reading of Lee Smith's novels. But the argument can seem forced because the topics are highly fragmented and the connections between history and literary interpretation are often underdeveloped or missing, so the book's purported focus on the kitchen recedes.

Certainly the kitchen is an important topic for Southern literature. These two books explore the roles of gender in Southern foodways, but discussions of the kitchen and food are not limited to gender. Analysis of food opens up discussion of race, class, labor, space, ideology, material culture, and virtually every other imaginable topic. The recent eruption of books on the subject indicates growing interest, and the methods of foodways analysis will likely be incorporated more frequently into future Southern criticism.

*Mercer University*

*David A. Davis*

