

The World in a Skillet: A Food Lover's Tour of the New American South

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Put aside any preconceived notions of a cuisine revolving around fried chicken, grits, and Coca-Cola. And just forget about Paula Dean. In *The World in a Skillet*, Angela and Paul Knipple, food writers from Memphis, Tennessee, have laid out the new paradigm in Southern food culture.

Their departure from the past is presented with the preface, entitled “We Are All From Somewhere Else,” in which the authors detail some of the historical events that have influenced Southern food culture. Their introductory chapter, “Keepers of the Flame,” takes the reader into the kitchens of four people who are sustaining and reviving cooking traditions, ranging from Three Sisters Soup (from the Creek Indians) to Calas, a sweetened rice fritter sold long ago on the streets of New Orleans.

The Knipples' version of history promotes the recognition that the United States was built by immigrants from all parts of the world, and, in recent years, improving economic conditions in the South have brought significant numbers of immigrants to this section of the country. These new citizens have, in turn, shared their unique food culture and recipes, and the result is an ever-changing and enriching cultural experience.

Like a complex stew, *The World in a Skillet* is organized in layers. One section introduces immigrants seeking the American dream, including Mexicans, Cubans, and Kurds. Another focuses on people living the American dream, such as new residents from Bosnia, Vietnam, and Central and South America. Finally, the Knipples highlight Chinese, Jewish, and African food culture in pages on bringing tradition to the table. Each section is filled with vignettes of people involved in various aspects of the food culture—from chefs and restaurateurs to household cooks. The authors are adept at weaving how and why these people came to this country with background information regarding their homelands and the food traditions they brought with them. And the recipes are easy to follow.

There is no shortage of surprises in *The World in a Skillet*. Who knew there was a large Kurdish settlement in Nashville? The recipe for *dowjic*—Kurdish-style chicken-and-rice soup, containing cinnamon, lemon juice, and fresh basil—is healthful *and* enticing. There are more conventional stories, too, like that of Francesco and Jennifer Fiorello and their Italian restaurant in Williamsburg, Virginia, which features their recipe for *involtini di melanzane* (eggplant stuffed with pasta).

The Knipples have enriched their offering with what they call “Kitchen Passports,” short inserts suggesting variations on the recipes presented. Each chapter also includes a “Culinary Tour Guide,” a brief discussion of the key ingredients and cooking techniques of a particular cuisine. The book has a foreword by John T. Edge, noted food columnist for the *New York Times* and director of the Southern Foodways Alliance, an institute of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi.

The World in a Skillet is a good book, even if devoured solely for the recipes. More importantly, however, it serves as an eloquent and timely testimony on how immigrants continue to renew and enrich this country.

JOHN MICHAEL SENGER (Spring 2012)

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