

Southern Living®

What Stands in a Storm, Part II: Food

While the instinct to feed others in crisis might not be strictly Southern, what we prepare, and how we do it may be our region's finest recipe.

August 2011

On their urban farm where fourth-graders once studied rows of turnips, the crops were poisoned with fiberglass. Tuscaloosa's Forest Lake was stripped of many of its oaks. But the founders of the Druid City Garden Project looked at the mess and saw another teachable moment.

Andy Grace, a film professor, and his wife, Rashmi, tore out the ruined crops and planted sunflowers, zinnias, marigolds, something pretty to look at as neighbors rebuilt.

They reached out to local farmers for vegetables they could not grow themselves, and turned them into collards and cornbread, roasted potatoes, homemade lasagna bursting with summer squash. A break from the shelters' emergency rations, often spooned from a can, these meals would be their next lesson: Food heals.

They called their project the Soul Food Brigade. In the kitchen of an Episcopal chapel, the couple formed a unique supper club, a group of friends who had already shared many evenings before, chopping hip-to-hip, weeping together over cut onions, preparing a communal meal.

Now they cooked for people who didn't have kitchens, for people who had driven hundreds of miles to ask a stranger "How can I help you?" They cooked meals that they would proudly serve company, prepared things that feed more than hunger. "This is the kind of food that we make when we're together," Andy said. "We wouldn't serve anything less."



Rashmi and Andy Grace founded the Soul Food Brigade to supplement shelter food.
Photo: Robbie Caponetto

* * * *



Neighbors, friends, family, and even strangers rallied together to feed the victims and volunteers.
Photo: Jason Wallis

They rolled into town after devastated town, the volunteers with coolers. When the parking lots filled with trucks and tents, they found a flat spot on the side of the road and held a handmade sign: We Have Free Food!

They were just a few families from a small-town church, good people who knew that dragging branches and lifting boards could not be done on an empty stomach. In three days, they grilled 700-odd burgers and 400 hot dogs in five torn towns, feeding nearly 1,000 strangers—victims, volunteers, anyone who was hungry.

“It makes people feel like things are back to normal,” said Janet Allen, as her husband, Tony, leaned into the smoke of the monster grill they towed behind their pickup. Horse farming is their business. Cooking is their

calling. “People say, get a restaurant,” Janet said. “I’d rather give it away. Makes me feel better.”

In the South, food and tragedy are sisters. And while the instinct to feed others in a crisis may not be strictly Southern, what we prepare, and how we do it—in lovingly generous, belt-busting portions—may be our region’s finest recipe.

It is true that some ills in this world cannot be cured by Rita Trull’s chocolate cake with buttercream frosting. But that cake, and the love and compassion baked into it, may be more beautiful than any cake that ever appeared on a magazine cover. By the look of the spread in front of her, Rita is not alone in her ability to cope, and help, through baking. When she put out a call for help after the storm, the answer came strong, and sweet.

“I said, ‘I need some cakes for these people!’ ” she said. “And I had 21 cakes come to my house.”

* * * *

Even as relief trucks filled with cans of beans and shelf-stable meat rolled into every battered town, so did a battalion of Junior League bakers, restaurant chefs, and Samaritans armed with spatulas. Cooks of all stripes tied on their aprons, stepped up to the plate, and filled it.

Some 2,000 volunteers converged upon the storm-whipped Arkansas town of Vilonia, and with those able, willing arms came mouths that needed feeding. The Senior Citizens Center became

the headquarters of help, and those who ran it (retired teachers, moms) somehow found a way to feed 1,200 people three squares a day.

Like the fable of Stone Soup, where a pot that begins with a single, boiled rock is shown to feed a village when each villager chips in, the meals came together, a town-wide potluck. The elementary school gave sausage and biscuits. The bank donated a near half-ton of meat. Ten flats of milk arrived from the grocery store, unbidden. The brand-new Mexican restaurant fed everyone and charged no one. The ice-cream company brought freezers and an 18-wheeler packed with ice, a giant community fridge where people saved food from their powerless kitchens.

The stream of donations seemed to have no end. Some people cried into that first hot meal, because it tasted so good, so normal. No one saw even close to the bottom of the barrel, much less had to scrape it.

“I had 25 cases of hamburger meat in the fridge trailer, and I went in there the other day and there were still 25 cases, even though we’ve been going through it every day for two weeks,” said Sandy Towles, a retired teacher who volunteers at the Senior Citizens Center. “People just keep bringing us more to serve. It’s like the proverbial loaves and fishes.”

Vilonia’s victims were soon feeding its volunteers. Miss Dollie Pruett, in her mid-sixties, rose at 4 a.m. to bake 200 homemade biscuits slathered with gravy for the National Guard. Military, firemen, and police came hungry from around the state. Volunteers such as Lorenda Gantz Donham worked double-shift hours to feed them. “We may be stinky and we may be bankrupt,” said Lorenda, who had never before cooked for an army, “but we will be full.”



Alfonso and Nora Walle, owners of El Rancho Mexican Restaurant in Vilonia, AR, with 1-year-old daughter Becky, fed everyone and charged no one after the storm.
Photo: David Hanson

* * * *