The Cookhouse Shepherd

Of necessity, as a passion and for preservation, Mama Dip's culinary journey was on nearby paths, worn well by the many who walked with her — especially the family who follow faithfully in her steps.

by Barry Yeoman
Mildred Council was walking toward a taxi stand in Chapel Hill’s Northside neighborhood in 1976 when a real estate agent she knew approached her. He was trying to replace a commercial tenant whose restaurant was failing. Council was working at Memorial Hospital, filling in for a soldier who was about to return and reclaim his job. He turned out to be a providential encounter.

As Council would later recall, George Tate addressed her as “Dip,” her childhood nickname. He gestured toward the restaurant, on West Rosemary Street, and urged her to take it over.

“I wasn’t probably a strong woman, but I would think he was just making fun of me,” she would recall. But Council commanded respect — she stood 6-foot-1, and black-eyed peas tap into a nostalgia felt by many Southerners, black and white.

“I had people crying, coming in here and eating,” said Tonya Council, Mildred’s granddaughter, who works there. “I hear, ‘These chicken and dumplings taste just like my grandmother’s.’”

That veneration extends to Council herself. In her 80s, she began leaving the daily operations to some of her children and grandchildren, but her vision has remained central to the menu.

“What we prepare here is pretty much what Mama prepared when she was growing up on the farm,” said her youngest daughter, Spring Council, who manages the restaurant at night and oversees specials, product distribution and catering.

“The smothered pork chops, the greens and the vegetables — whatever she put on our table, that’s what we serve here.”

The restaurant’s longevity in preserving traditional African-American foodways means its reputation has reached beyond North Carolina. “A lot of times, with establishments like Mama Dip’s, when the original owners want to pass the business on, or [they die], that place goes out of business because the kids are not interested,” said Adrian Miller, author of Soul Food: A dash-by-dash history. “Mama Dip’s is one of just a handful of examples of an intergenerational restaurant.”

At the same time, Mama Dip’s has inspired contemporary Southern chefs by serving food purchased from nearby farms, cooked in styles true to the region. “People talk about local, sustainable — she was local before local was cool,” said culinary historian Michael W. Twitty, author of The Cooking gene: an exploration of the roots of black Southern cooking. “Without women like Mildred Council, the larger cuisine of the New Southern movement is impossible.”

Council’s story touches on farm life, race relations and civic leadership in North Carolina. Scholars and chefs hold her up as the visible head of a history with a long tail: the story of black women who have fed Americans, often with no acknowledgement, since before the founding of the nation.

By speaking publicly about her past, she imbued her food with a narrative — a life of hardship, endurance, skills-building and entrepreneurship, belying the myth of the magical black cook who effortlessly conjures the food that nourishes us.

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“Papa was one of those all-around men — what you’d call a believer.”

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Mildred Council said in March. She was finishing breakfast at her home, in a piney neighborhood 10 miles north of downtown. By then, Council was getting around in a wheelchair, and she had admitted her memory was shaky.

But her throaty laugh conveyed the strength for which she was known in Chapel Hill. Where her memories were thin, there was voluminous public record to fill in the gaps, including long interviews she gave to UNC’s Southern Oral History Program in 1994 and the University of Mississippi’s Southern Foodways Alliance in 2007.

Council never talked about her career without first invoking her father, Ed Cotton, a sharecropper who raised seven children by himself after his wife, Effie, died of breast cancer in 1931. Mildred, the youngest, was 2. “He felt like he could do anything, and he could inspire his children and learn them to cook, the boys and the girls, learn them to plow, to chop cotton,” she said.

The Cottons’ house, north of Pittsboro, leaked and had no indoor toilet. Mattresses were made from sacks stuffed with wheat straw. Dinner was primarily what the family harvested, butchered, canned, foraged, fished and hunted. Water came from a well, and — when that ran dry in the summer — from drums and barrels that caught the rain. Because she was Tall, Council could reach the bottom of those containers with a dipper made from a gourd. So she came to be called Dip.

Along with raising his children, Ed Cotton took in what his daughter calls “stragglers”: runaway boys who were abused or thrown out by their fathers. “Papa would make a pallet for them. Papa showed them how to cook. They knew how to go to the garden or the woods and find something to cook. They knew how to trap a rabbit. They knew how to cook a squirrel.”

As a child, Council and her older sisters prepared the family’s meals using what was available — they cooked without written recipes. “What’s coming up, you pinch it off and you cook it,” she said.

Then, when she was 9, Council’s father asked her to take her “turn in the kitchen.” Remembering what she had observed, Council built a fire in the stove — that took a long time — and cut a hambone into pieces with an ax. She boiled whippoorwill
peas and baked an egg custard pie. That was the meal that launched her vocation; she would recall the details, down to the hint of nutmeg purchased from a traveling salesman, in her 1999 cookbook, Mama Dip's Kitchen. Council's father moved the family several times during her childhood — eventually, when Mildred was a teen, to Chapel Hill.

If you were hungry...

After her family left the farm, Council moved in with her grandmother in Durham and attended cosmetology school. She worked for a few months at a Franklin Street salon, but she never enjoyed it.

"That was the hardest job I had. I stood beside the door, outside, to advertise my self: 'I'll fix your hair.'" Her passion was food — "I wasn't a beautician" — so she left to cook for a local family.

Meanwhile, she married a man named Joe Council and started raising her own family, leaving her job (as was the expectation) each time she got pregnant and finding new employment after the baby was born. Sometimes she cooked for places that would not have welcomed her family as diners.

She would come home to cook again, including all-day Sunday dinners.

"Many times we'd go up to her house, we could get something to eat," said Robert Campbell, a Chapel Hill minister and chef whose half-brother, Roy Cotton, Council raised. "Anything from fried chicken, potato salad, cornbread and biscuits, pies and cake — every weekend, it was available."

Sometimes, he said, nine or 10 children who were not Council's would show up.

On weekday afternoons, neighborhood children would pour off the school bus and descend on the Council home. "She would have big pots of food on the stove," recalled Delaine Ingram, a retired beautician who lived across the street. "Chicken and dumplings, pintos, beans, biscuits — good food, yes, sir. If you were hungry, you were going to eat."

Council also made sure the kids were well-dressed and presentable. Once, when Ingram was 8 or 9, she showed up sporting an Afro. "When I got off the bus, she said, 'Come here. What are you doing going to an Afro.'" Ingram said, "I'd get in the car with her as kids, and she would go to folks' houses that didn't have food," said Ingram. Those with stoves got raw ingredients; those without got cooked meals. "We knew the families. We knew they didn't have much."

Living in town, Mildred made sure her children understood the importance of fresh vegetables. "We had to go out to the country and help pick string beans and squash or corn," Spring said. "It really wasn't hard labor, but we thought it was the worst thing ever, especially when we encountered a worm."

For all the wholesome family scenes, Council also was suffering through a marriage that she later described as violent. She told UNC's Southern Oral History Program that she waited until Spring turned 18, then visited her husband at the pool hall where he worked. "And I said, 'Joe, I'm leaving. Just like that.'"

Magic, it is not

It's entirely possible to eat at Mama Dip's Kitchen, to enjoy the pork chops and fried chicken, and never to learn about its founder.

"But knowing those stories helps us to taste the food differently because you're tasting it with an appreciation for some legacies and some cultures that go into it," said Poche Williams-Forson, chair of American studies at the University of Maryland and author of Building Houses out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food and Power.

Because Council was so successful, it's easy to imagine her as a singular virtuoso, stripped of historic context. That would be a mistake. Black women have cooked for America for centuries — on slave ships, as slaves on farms and in cities, on battlegrounds, in brothels and boarding houses, in the kitchens of white families in whites-only restaurants. They cooked for black travelers who were barred from whites-only restaurants. They cooked with effortlessness but also of triumph and success."

From the walls of her restaurant: With then-President George W. Bush during her White House visit in 2002; her 1999 cookbook, Council and all her children.

There was triumph in cooking, too. After the Civil War, food helped foster black women's financial independence. In her book, Williams-Forson writes about the "waster-carriers" in Gooch Spring, VA, who set up shop on railroad platforms and sold fried chicken, biscuits and coffee to passengers as they rolled through. "Almost every whistle-stop throughout the South had African-American women cooking and hawking and serving food," she said. "Their work shed, set the stage for entrepreneurs like Council. Since Council was a teen, to Chapel Hill."

"With African-American culture, we tend to see folks as isolated, and they're not. They're part of a long, rich history of struggle and toil but also of triumph and success."

Often, the struggle gets papered over, giving rise to a mythology of culinary magicians. "The air of exoticism, especially has been something demanded of African-American women who cook," said Elizabeth Englehardt, the John Shelton Reed Distinguished Professor of Southern studies at UNC. "The reality is that successful professional cooking — even by someone like Council, who eschewed tablespoons and measuring cups — takes recipe development, practice and refinement, and an armamentarium of business skills. Part of our culture is to emphasize innate talent rather than the years it takes to hone your craft," said Miller, the Soul Food author.

Getting popular, staying focused

The block where Council opened her restaurant felt farther from campus in 1976 than it does today. "[It] was a little bit on the edge," recalled Bill Smith '72, the chef at Crook's Corner, the upscale Southern restaurant four blocks away. "We didn't realize that." But there was a rundown apartment that you could afford: "West Rosemary Street also marked the southern boundary of Northside, historically the largest African-American neighborhood in Chapel Hill."

"But knowing those stories helps us to
Cooking like family: Front row, from left, are daughter Sandra Council and granddaughters Nicole Atwater, Monica Atwater and Natalie Atwater. In back row are grandson Evan Council, son Joe Council, daughter Spring Council and son Geary Council. Council felt confident that her talents had been transmitted to future generations. “I’m so glad what I’ve done with my children. Every one of my children can cook.” As she neared the end of her life, Council considered how many of the items she had created over the years were in people’s homes now. When she returned from the hospital after surgery, she was preparing the dinner for the first time in months. Her daughter told me that, that night, they’d had a burglary. Her mother said, “Forget that, and there she was preparing the dinner after this home invasion. She said, ‘The dinner will go on.’”

“Every one of my children can cook!”

Mildred Council’s country dinners continue to influence others. “The menu is pretty much the way it’s always been, and that’s a good thing,” said Smith, the chef at Crook’s Corner, who visits Mama Dip’s about every six weeks and often orders takeaway chicken. “I went through a period of experimentation, but in my old age I’ve returned to the more classical way of doing things. You learn to un-gild the lily if you go along and leave well enough alone.”

As she neared the end of her life, Council felt certain that her talents had been transmitted to future generations. “I have reconected with old friends, made new ones and had the privilege of mentoring, encouraging and promoting young women at Carolina. It’s so important to me because my daughters have had extraordinary experiences here also, and I want to ensure our future women leaders have the support, guidance and resources they need for success.”

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