

## Edna Lewis (1916-2006)

### From Historian Phil Audibert's book, *Local folks, A collection of stories about people*:

"When Martin Luther King made his 'I have a dream' speech, Edna Lewis was standing right behind him, a close-up eye witness to one of the century's more historic moments. When Tennessee Williams wandered every morning into the Cafe Nicholson in New York, she was there to open the door. When her book 'The Taste of Country Cooking' came out, America was ready for its own culinary identity. From her humble beginnings as a barefoot black girl in the tiny community of Freetown near Lahore in Orange County to preparing a James Beard memorial dinner for 1,000 guests in Rockefeller Center in New York, Edna has been in the right place at the right time.

" 'It wasn't by my design,' she says bashfully. It just sort of happened that way. Edna has never aggressively pursued fame. Rather it has followed her around, like a pet dog on a leash.

"Maybe that's why there's something about Edna Lewis that commands respect. Affectionately called 'the Queen of Egypt' by food luminaries in New York, this blissfully serene silver-haired woman has set them on their ear precisely because she is so refreshingly unpretentious in such a pretentious world. She is shy....almost to a fault. She speaks so softly you can hardly hear her. Sometimes she's hard to pin down. She rarely volunteers information about herself, unless you drag it out of her. Yet she has rubbed elbows with the rich and famous and with the poor and humble, and they're all the same to her.

"Edna Lewis is a cook. She prefers that to being called a chef. But she's a darn good cook....good enough to teach it, to write about it, and to be honored for it nationwide. She is indisputably one of the champions of American regional cooking. She is probably one of the 50 most important influences on today's national cuisine scene.

"She is also striking looking. Usually dressed in long African print dresses, she is tall and willowy, dignified and earthy. Even in her 70s her coppery skin is as smooth as an 18-year-old's....her teeth gleaming and perfect....her hands almost as big as a man's. She gets her high cheekbones and flashing eyes from her great-grandmother, who was a full-blooded Indian. She gets her dignified, patient, sometimes pained expression from her grandmother and grandfather, both slaves in the Lahore area [of Orange County] at the time of the Civil War.

"Back in the 1880's, her grandfather, Chester Lewis, along with several other freed slaves, was given land by a sympathetic plantation owner in Lahore. A few other families moved in, built homes in a circle, with streets radiating in all directions and the village of Freetown was born. Although the community was similar to hundreds of other freed slaved settlements scattered throughout the south, Edna feels this one was special....as her brother terms it, 'blessed.'

“She grew up in this idyllic community with no idea of what was in store for her. Her grandfather, the stern patriarch, sent away for a teacher and established a community school in the living room of his clapboard-sided log cabin, even though he could neither read nor write himself. She remembers riding with him in a horse and buggy to the Bethel Baptist church which he helped to found. She remembers waking up on the first warm spring morning, jumping out of bed, dressing in a sunny spot, and dashing outdoors to see what nature had brought her....be it a freshly hatched brood of chicks pecking about the yard, or a newborn baby calf. But most of all she remembers the food.

“She picked lambs quarters and salsify in the fields and woods. She gathered the first green peas in the garden, greeted the fishmonger who brought the spring shad, smelled the hams hanging in the meat house, marveled at the wild game in November, and watched her mother prepare the biscuits and the preserves and the country fried apples and the cornbread and the wild rice and the brandied peaches and all the other delicious treats that poured from her woodstove kitchen. ‘I guess I was born to cook,’ says Edna in the numerous articles that have been done about her in publications ranging from the *New York Times* to the *San Francisco Chronicle*. She says she can’t remember not cooking.

“But in the late 1930’s she followed a call answered by many young blacks and left home for New York, not to be a chef but, as she terms it, to find ‘greener pastures.’ Although she had friends to stay with, ‘I was practically on my own.’ In 1946, this shy country girl won a chance to design Bonwit Teller’s Christmas windows. She was given space and staff in the store’s custom-made department, where she went to work furiously with fabrics and chicken wire.

“In 1948, she and antique dealer, John Nicholson, opened a restaurant on East 58th Street near the United Nations. Located on what was known as Writer’s Row, it was an overnight success. Why? ‘I don’t know,’ she lowers her eyes with characteristic shyness. ‘I guess because we were young and people liked it. We only had one menu....the same thing every day.’ If you didn’t like broiled oysters, mussels stuffed with tomato and rice, French onion soup, roast chicken, filet mignon, veal scallops, salad, and Edna’s famed chocolate souffle, you were in the wrong place. They had one seating for each for lunch and dinner and virtually no overhead or waste.

“Writers, Truman Capote, Carson McCullers, and William Faulkner; artist, Salvador Dali; playwright, Lillian Hellman; President’s widow, Eleanor Roosevelt; actress, Rita Hayworth; and billionaire, Howard Hughes were just a few of the luminaries who graced the doors of Cafe Nicholson. Several different languages could be heard at the same time as diplomats from the United Nations would come in to graze. Tennessee Williams lived across the street, ‘and he would come in every morning while I was ordering groceries for the day and have coffee. It was just an artist’s hangout. Everybody that came to town came at least once anyway.’ Something about being in the right place at the right time.

“But it never went to her head. In fact, in the 1950’s, she backed out of Cafe Nicholson because, ‘I just became worn out.’ Next came a 1500 bird pheasant ranch in New Jersey. ‘It went real well

till all of a sudden one summer I came out of the house and the birds were lying dead all over the place,' all victims of a highly contagious sleeping sickness. 'It really tore me up.'

"Next she prepared dishes for a specialty food shop, and catered and, for seven years, worked in the African Hall of the American Museum of Natural History, where her long-standing love affair with Africa was first kindled. That led to her ongoing deep involvement with African students and diplomats. She showed a print of black women selling fried chicken at the Gordonsville railroad station to some Nigerian women and they instantly recognized their African headdress. She found a recipe for red rice in Charleston, South Carolina, and 'my Nigerian friends make it the same way....the same ingredients,' she says incredulously. She claims sesame seed, okra, eggplant, sweet potatoes, and peanuts all came to this country on the slave ships from Africa. And looking back on her childhood, she remembers household traditions steeped in African folklore.

"One day, Edna Lewis slipped and fell in the snow and broke her leg. Lying in a hospital bed, she was so bored, she started to write. And so 'The Edna Lewis Cookbook,' was born. But her real success as an author came with the second book, 'The Taste of Country Cooking,' published by Alfred Knopf, in 1976. The book, which is half recipes, half narrative of the idyllic life she led as a child in Freetown is now in its eleventh printing. It is regarded by some as the Bible of southern country cooking, and it came out of a time when American cuisine was eager for an identity all its own.

"As a result of her growing reputation as a champion of American regional cooking, Edna cooked during the mid 1980's at Fearrington House near Chapel Hill in North Carolina. In 1985, she became 'chef consultant' at the historic low country plantation, Middleton Place near Charleston, South Carolina. Edna designed a colonial menu, drawing heavily on the fresh foods of the region.

"She has since finished her third book entitled, 'In Pursuit of Flavor.' It will feature recipes she researched and developed at Middleton Place. 'It's not strictly southern,' she explains. 'The recipes are from all over...the recipes that I like and think have good flavor.' The book has an apt title, because flavor is Edna's prime culinary goal.

"And that's hard to find in these days of formula frozen and fast foods. Edna's first advice to any cook is 'start with food that is fresh and of course supermarket food is not fresh, so they should grow their own garden.' That's hard for Edna to do, except when she visits her sister in Orange County. Otherwise she lives in New York with another sister. But at dawn at the Union Square Farmer's Market, she's often first in line to carefully pick through the garden-fresh organically grown produce.

"Edna even has a problem with hybrid seeds, saying they don't produce vegetables with as much character or flavor. And she tends to shun some of the more modern conveniences of cooking, like food processors, asking only for a reliable gas stove. She says convection ovens tend to ruin pastry. Like most natural cooks she doesn't follow recipes to the letter, which is

difficult when she's writing a book and must be specific for measuring spoon fanatics. Her preferred vegetables are eggplant, white potatoes, salsify, green beans, squash and tomatoes 'if they're red ripe.' She does not prepare much beef because she says the meat nowadays has lost its flavor.

"Haute cuisine has gotten as bad haute couture. Every year there's a new fad. Restaurants come and go. But Edna scoffs, 'I don't pay attention to that because Americans are always asking what can we do next.' The newest rage? 'I guess eating home cooking out, is in', she riddles. She prefers Italian cooking to French, saying, 'It's so varied. There's so much Italian cooking we don't know anything about.'

"Once, Robert Mondavi, of the wine and vineyard fame, flew Edna out to California to his Great Chefs of France five-day cooking school. 'They felt they should have an American meal so they invited me to make a lunch for one day.' She looks almost embarrassed. 'It sounds silly to fly to California to make a lunch,' she whispers. She fixed light fare...tomato soup with basil, broiled oysters, biscuits and preserves. "One of the men sat next to me and he said I like your food better than the chef's, which was really nice of him to say.'

"And, for several years now, she has participated in the James Beard memorial feast, a fund-raising cook-off amongst the nation's greatest chefs (cooks?) to raise money for weekend deliveries of hot meals to the elderly. The first time, Edna prepared baked Virginia ham, homemade biscuits, strawberry preserves, pound cake, and salad...'small portions, enough for a thousand people,' she giggles girlishly.

"Then the next week she'll show up at Bethel Baptist Church between Unionville and Lahore for Revival, like she has almost every August since she left the area 50 years ago. She and her sister will prepare a stunning spread of food on the makeshift tables under the oak trees outside the church her grandfather helped found. There will be large portions, enough for 100, of ham, and fried chicken and green beans and red ripe garden tomatoes and pound cake and real lemonade, with lemons floating in the crock. Revival she explains is a homecoming, a renewal, a reaffirmation of one's roots, a confirmation of one's humble beginnings, no matter who you've been rubbing elbows with recently.

"Across the road is the cemetery, bearing the names of the first families of Freetown. Down the road a couple of miles the village of Freetown is now choked by honeysuckle. All that remains is a fallen down house and the beautifully crafted chimney of another. Those who remember it agree that once the founders died off, their children gradually drifted away to the cities to find work, perhaps even fame, like Edna did. She sadly quotes Thomas Wolfe's 'Look Homeward Angel.' 'You can't come home again,' she says, her voice breaking slightly.

"But for a week or two in August she can, because it's the right place at the right time."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Phil Audibert, *Local Folks: A collection of stories about people From the files of the Orange County Review* (United States: Bookcrafters Inc., 1989), 41-43.

From “Edna Lewis”, an article in *Kinfolk* by author Sara Franklin:



**Edna Lewis, the Grand Dame of Southern Cooking**

--Photo by John T. Hill (“Edna Lewis” in *Kinfolk*)

“When Edna Lewis died in 2006, she was among the most beloved figures of American food. The author of four cookbooks—the best known being her 1976 memoir-infused *The Taste of Country Cooking*—she earned the praise of the food literati of her era, including Craig Claiborne, M.F.K. Fisher and James Beard. In 2014, Lewis was honored by the United States Postal Service—commemorated on a postage stamp as much for her

advocacy of the farm-to-table methods of traditional Southern cooking as for her rejection of the knee-slapping stereotypes of the American South and its food.

“...Lewis was born in Freetown, Virginia, a farming community settled by emancipated slaves that included her grandparents, Chester and Lucinda. Lewis’s childhood orbited around food production and preparation. Her family and neighbors worked cooperatively toward self-sufficiency, an achievable goal—save a few staples such as coffee and sugar—in a pre-industrial South.

“In *The Taste of Country Cooking*, Lewis chronicled her rural upbringing, taking readers through a year in the farming community with menus and recipes shaped by the particular offerings of each season. She writes of storing hand-churned butter in the cool water that ran beneath the springhouse, picking wild watercress from the streams and walking behind the plow to sow seeds. In the kitchen, where everything was prepared on a wood-burning stove, Lewis was an apprentice to her mother, under whose guidance she learned how to prepare three meals a day, every day. In Lewis’s Freetown, cooking was both an essential craft and a prized art, as quotidian as sweeping the floor and also an important outlet for creative expression. It was, too, a way of teaching and preserving cultural heritage; Lewis’s menus celebrate Emancipation Day and Juneteenth rather than Thanksgiving.

“Lewis’s pride in her ties to the African diaspora and her sense of the importance of African-American contributions to both Southern and American culture is the thread that connects her writings and approach to food. As she aged, Lewis grew increasingly intent on correctly replicating the flavors of her youth; she was chasing memories, and working to preserve the culture of food in Freetown and the particular piece of Southern history that it represented. In Lewis’s essay, ‘What is Southern?’ which was published in *Gourmet* two years after her death, she wrote, ‘The world has changed. We are now faced with picking up the pieces and trying to put them into shape, documenting them so the present-day young generation can see what southern food was like.’

“Lewis’s father died when she and her siblings were young, leaving her mother to care for a large family through the lean years of the Great Depression. Lewis left Freetown at age 16, later moving to Washington, D.C. and then to New York City. There, she briefly found work in a Brooklyn laundry (famously lasting only three hours at the ironing board before being summarily fired) and later as a seamstress. Her skillful copies of designer frocks and African-inspired dresses drew a following among New York’s fashion set, including Marilyn Monroe and Doe Avedon, and she went on to dress the windows of such elegant shops as Bonwit Teller. Immersed in the bohemian scene of postwar New York, she married Steve Kingston, a retired merchant marine who was active in the communist cause. She also met and befriended an eccentric antiques dealer and entrepreneur named Johnny Nicholson and, in 1949, took the helm of his newly opened East Side venture, Café Nicholson.

“At Café Nicholson, Lewis earned praise for her fine preparations of such bistro favorites as roast chicken, mussels in delicate broth, lightly dressed green salads and cheese and chocolate soufflés. The restaurant attracted a tony crowd that included Eleanor Roosevelt, Marlon Brando, Gore Vidal and, notably, Southern writers like Tennessee Williams, Truman Capote and William Faulkner. Using only muscle memory, Lewis prepared biscuits, pan-fried chicken and other comfort foods that reminded them of home.

“Lewis left Nicholson in the 1950s and undertook a number of ventures, including running a pheasant farm with her husband and working as a caterer. Eventually she realized her dream of opening her own restaurant in Harlem, a short-lived establishment the name of which, strangely, none of her living family members can recall.

“By then she had earned a name for herself, and in 1972, published her first book, *The Edna Lewis Cookbook*, which she co-authored with socialite Evangeline Peterson. A few years later, while laid up with a broken leg, Lewis decided to write another book. Around that time, she was introduced to legendary editor Judith Jones (whose list of culinary authors includes a veritable who’s who of modern American food writers including Julia Child, M.F.K. Fisher, James Beard, Claudia Roden and Madhur Jaffrey). It was a working relationship that resulted in the publication of *The Taste of Country Cooking* in 1976, followed by *In Pursuit of Flavor* in 1988 and *The Gift of Southern Cooking*, a collaboration between Lewis and her protégé and companion, Scott Peacock, in 2003. Meanwhile, she continued to cook professionally, helming the kitchen at such noted restaurants as Fearrington House in North Carolina, Middleton Place in South Carolina and Gage and Tollner in Brooklyn.

“Posthumous articles and food-world awards have tended to rehash the same hackneyed story of the black farm girl from the South translating her happy, autonomous childhood to the pages of cookbooks and onto the tables of fine-dining restaurants. In 2013, a one-woman show, *Dinner with Edna Lewis*, premiered at the Southern Foodways Alliance at its annual symposium in Oxford, Mississippi. In it, Lewis is portrayed as a slow-talking, gentle retiree with a thick Southern accent, gone soft around the hips and mired in nostalgia, remembering only her days as a girl in Virginia and then as a chef in the heart of bohemian New York.

“ ‘Aunt Edna wasn’t like that at all,’ says Lewis’s niece, Nina Williams-Mbengue. ‘She had no Southern accent whatsoever, moved about 90 miles per hour, and talked kind of fast.’ Williams-Mbengue remembers Lewis as a giggler, with a great sense of humor, but also shy, unassuming and humble. ‘She was politically astute,’ Williams-Mbengue remembers. On Sundays, the family watched *Meet the Press* with the television set up on the dining table; no one was permitted to talk while the show was on. ‘Aunt Edna may have worked all day, but she’d pull a chair up to the TV and listen,’ Williams-Mbengue recalls of the

Watergate era, which coincided with the years in which Lewis was working on the manuscript for *The Taste of Country Cooking*.

**“Edna bakes a cake for *Vogue* in 1973”**

--Photo by John T. Hill (“Edna Lewis” in *Kinfolk*)

“Lewis was an utter perfectionist when it came to testing the recipes for her books, throwing away attempts that didn’t live up to her memories. Some recipes she only tested when she



went back to Virginia to visit her sister Jenny, who lived on a farm not far from where Freetown had been. For others, she obsessively tracked down the freshest, most historically accurate ingredients she could find. She rode the subway from the South Bronx to the newly opened Greenmarket in Union Square, and once requested that her brother FedEx her a squirrel, so that she could refine a squirrel stew recipe. Lewis even had Jenny mail her pot ash to use in various culinary applications, Williams-Mbengue recalls. ‘Aunt Edna and my mom laughed about that for a long time,’ she says. ‘They thought they might get arrested if someone mistook it for dope.’



Lewis worked well past the retirement age of most chefs. When she cooked at Gage and Tollner in Brooklyn in the '90s, she would arrive at 7 in the morning and often work until 11 at night. 'Other chefs couldn't keep up with her,' Williams-Mbengue recalls, and she was 75 years old.'<sup>2</sup>



**Edna Lewis collects pears in Freetown, Virginia.**

--Photo by John T. Hill ( "Edna Lewis" in *Kinfolk*)

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<sup>2</sup> Franklin, Sara. "Edna Lewis, the Grand Dame of Southern Cooking." *Kinfolk*, Google, Accessed June 6, 2021, <https://www.kinfolk.com/edna-lewis/>

**Additional information from: “Edna Lewis, 1916-2006” by Kerri Lee Alexander on the National Women’s History Museum’s website:**

“...Lewis spent much of her career cooking in the South but returned to New York City at the age of 72 to become a chef at the Brooklyn restaurant Gage & Tollner. However, in the early 1990s Lewis moved to Georgia and retired from restaurants. She received various awards and honors including: “Who’s Who in American Cooking,” by Cook’s Magazine, an honorary Ph.D. in Culinary Arts from Johnson & Wales University in 1996, the James Beard Living Legend Award in 1999, and was named “Grande Dame” by Les Dames d’Escoffier International in 1999. In Georgia, she became a mentor and companion to Scott Peacock, the southern cook who was the head chef at the Georgia governor’s mansion. Together, they wrote *The Gift of Southern Cooking: Recipes and Revelations from Two Great American Cooks* in 2003.

“A few months before her 90th birthday, Dr. Edna Lewis passed away from cancer in 2006.”<sup>3</sup>

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**The Edna Lewis Postage Stamp issued September 26, 2014 by the US Postal Service<sup>4</sup>**

<sup>3</sup> Alexander, Kerri Lee. “Edna Lewis, 1916-2006”. *National Women’s History Museum*, Google, Accessed June 6, 2021, <https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/edna-lewis>

<sup>4</sup> Photographer unknown. “Edna Lewis”. Mystic Stamp Company, Google, Accessed June 6, 2021, <https://www.mysticstamp.com/Products/United-States/4922/USA/>

A young Edna Lewis in New York City during the 1930's



--Photo Courtesy of Phil Audibert

The following was written about Edna Lewis's funeral:

***EDNA COMES HOME***

**By Phil Audibert**

"It was 1984...summertime. Edna Lewis was sniffing a pear blossom from a tree her forebears probably planted along the footpath to Freetown. She quoted Thomas Wolfe's play, *Look Homeward Angel*. 'You can't come home again,' she said wistfully. 'You can't come home again.'

"Well last Saturday, in a cruel February wind, she did come home...for the last time. Following a rousing service at the church her grandfather helped found in 1892, Edna Lewis was laid to rest in the family cemetery nearby. She leaves behind a legacy larger than life itself.

"Author of at least four cookbooks, honored by chef's associations and foundations world wide, restaurant owner, consultant, and most importantly, cook (she didn't like to be called a chef), Edna Lewis may have been the single most important person in this country to give American Southern cooking its rightful place in the world of haute cuisine. Before Edna, it was only French, Italian or Chinese. Since her milestone cookbook *The Taste of Country Cooking*, Southern cooking and its regional offshoot specialties are offered in gourmet restaurants from Oregon to Georgia, Maine to Arizona. She helped give, not just southern cooking, but American cuisine in general, an identity to call its own.

"Most recently, Edna shared an apartment in Decatur, Georgia with Watershed restaurant owner and chef, Scott Peacock. Known as the Odd Couple of Southern Cooking, they co-penned a final cookbook, *The Gift of Southern Cooking*. In recent years, Edna's bright light had dimmed, and she had become increasingly frail. Early last week, Scott Peacock, who called Edna his mentor, phoned her surviving brother and sister in Lahore, to inform them that Edna, at age 89, had died peacefully in her sleep.

"It marks the end of a remarkable journey and life that started in 1916 in a tiny community of eleven families, founded by freed slaves, one of them her grandfather, just up the road from Jackson's Store at Lahore in Orange County. In *The Taste of Country Cooking*, Edna gives us a glimpse of what it was like, growing up a barefoot black girl in Freetown.

'After the long spell of winter, we welcomed the first warm day of February, heralding the coming of spring. Often a mother hen would surprise us with a healthy brood of baby chickens that she had hatched in the hayloft and somehow gotten down to the ground. They would be chirping and pecking in the snowy slush of the barnyard. We would pick them up and carry them and the mother into the kitchen and place them

in a wooden box behind the cook stove.' *The Taste of Country Cooking* by Edna Lewis

"In interviews conducted in the mid and late 1980's, Edna related how grandfather Chester established a school in his living room at Freetown even though he could not read or write himself. She remembered the day he died, when family members "covered all the mirrors; it had something to do with seeing the spirit.'

"She remembered walking to Jackson's Store in Lahore and marveling at the variety of goods offered. 'At that time he sold everything: sugar, mincemeat for pies, shoes and plows and all the seed for the farmers around, Christmas presents, Valentines. They were the center where everyone came to sit around and,' she giggled girlishly, 'gossip.'

"She told of an idyllic community, where every adult was a parent to every child. 'When children know that people love them and also know that always someone is there; there is less chance of them becoming unruly or disobedient,' she said wisely. She talked of people who took care of their own. 'If someone fell ill, then the neighbors would go in and milk the cows and feed the chickens and clean the house and cook the food and come at night and sit up with you. It was great. I never met any other people like them.'

"But folks move on and times change and Freetown was gradually abandoned, slipping into vine-choked ruin, leaving behind only a chimney, a collapsed roof, the outline of a foundation. **Chester Lewis, an emancipated slave who helped found Bethel Baptist Church, sent**

away for a school teacher to educate the youngsters at Freetown, even though he was illiterate himself.



--Information and Photo Courtesy of Phil Audibert

“Edna too moved on....to New York City where this shy country girl became something of a radical and did a variety of interesting things from writing for *The Daily Worker* to designing Bonwit Teller’s Christmas window displays.

“Although it really stems from watching her mother as a child, you might say Edna’s official culinary career started in 1948, when she established Café Nicholson with an antique dealer of the same name. Located on Writer’s Row, right around the corner from the United Nations, customers included authors Truman Capote, William Faulconer, Tennessee Williams, artist Salvador Dali, playwright Lillian Hellman, actress Rita Hayworth, billionaire Howard Hughes, to name drop just a few. ‘It was just an artist’s hangout,’ she shrugged.

“When she tired of the restaurant, as one often can, she established a 1500-bird pheasant farm in New Jersey. ‘It went real well till all of a sudden one summer I came out of the house and the birds were lying dead all over the place,’ the victims of some mysterious disease.

“She developed her long standing love of her forebears’ culture when she landed a job designing displays in the African Hall of the American Museum of Natural History. And later, she adopted a young Ethiopian man, Afewarke Paulos, as her son.

“When asked by a New York cooking school to teach a course in Southern cuisine, she jumped on the train and traveled down to Orange to secure a whole hog from her brother, Lue. The

slaughtered pig, packed in ice, rode in the baggage car. The first day of class she laid the carcass out on a slab, head and innards still attached. She explained how every part of a hog can be used...every part. The aspiring city slicker chefs gawked in horror. 'Those people didn't even know that chickens have feet,' she whooped indignantly.

"One day, when Edna was in her 60's, she slipped in the snow and broke her leg. Bored and hospital-bound, she started to write. The result was *The Edna Lewis Cookbook*, now out of print. Her second effort, however, *The Taste of Country Cooking*, published by Alfred Knopf in 1976, became her seminal masterpiece. And through the recipes she learned from her mother, she wove the stories of her childhood in Freetown.

'A stream filled from the melted snows of winter would flow quietly by us, gurgling softly and gently pulling the leaf of a fern that hung lazily from the side of its bank. After moments of complete exhilaration we would return joyfully to the house for breakfast. Floating out to greet us was the aroma of coffee cooking and meat frying, mingled with the smell of oak wood burning in the cook stove. We would wash our hands and take our places on the bench behind the table made for the children.' *The Taste of Country Cooking* by Edna Lewis

"Edna's reputation as an accomplished cook and champion of Southern Cuisine skyrocketed, but it never ever went to her head. She became a regular among other great chefs to be invited to cook a dinner for 1000 in honor of the late great James Beard, benefiting Meals on Wheels. Robert Mondavi, the California wine magnate, flew her out to prepare lunch for one of his five-day French cooking schools. 'It sounds silly to fly to California to make lunch,' said an embarrassed Edna at the time, adding, 'one of the men sat next to me and said *'I like your food better than the chef's.'* She made tomato soup with basil, broiled oysters, biscuits with homemade preserves.

"In the early and mid 1980's, Edna was Executive Chef at Fearington House, near Chapel Hill. Later she became a "Chef Consultant," at Middleton Place near Charleston, South Carolina. Her last job as a restaurant cook was in Brooklyn at Gage and Tollner. In 1995, she was awarded an honorary PhD in Culinary Arts from Johnson and Wales University. And most recently she was named a Grande Dame of Les Dames d'Escoffier International, a hallowed worldwide organization of women chefs. But Edna always saw herself as a cook, plain and simple.

"Although Edna Lewis lived from New York City to Decatur, Georgia and places in between, she always tried to make it home for revival in August...a week of church-going, music and singing, and of course homemade, homegrown food, served on long makeshift tables underneath the oak trees at Bethel Baptist Church. She and her sisters would work for days preparing ham and fried chicken, green beans, tomatoes so ripe they were still warm from the sun, pound cake, and real lemonade with quartered lemons floating in the stoneware crock. Inside this same church

where, in a rising crescendo of words, the minister still calls and the congregation still answers, souls were nourished...outside, bodies replenished.

“Revival, she explained, is a homecoming, a renewal, a reaffirmation of one’s roots, a confirmation of one’s humble beginnings. This past Saturday, there was another such revival...when Edna came home.

‘I loved walking barefoot behind my father in the newly ploughed furrow, carefully putting one foot down before the other and pressing it into the warm ploughed earth, so comforting to the soles of my feet.’ *The Taste of Country Cooking* by Edna Lewis”



**GUESS WHO’S COMING TO DINNER?  
By Phil Audibert**

“In the mid and late 1980’s, I had considerable contact with Edna Lewis. She helped me with an oral history/photographic slide program I produced about Freetown, currently gathering dust in the archives of the Orange County Historical Society. A few years later I interviewed Edna



again for a feature article about her life that appeared in the *Orange County Review* March 24, 1988 and was reprinted in a collection of my favorite feature articles of the time, called *Local Folks*.

“Edna was a magnificent looking woman, seemingly six feet tall, with long smooth, sinewy copper colored limbs. She had the biggest and most powerful hands I had ever seen on a woman. She always dressed in her trademark African print dresses and long dangling earrings, and she always tied her snow-white hair back in a neat bun. Her high cheekbones, slightly almond-shaped eyes, bore testimony to the legend that her great grandmother was full blooded American Indian.

“At first, Edna was not easy to interview. Painfully shy, she spoke softly and volunteered little until she felt she could trust you not to exploit her. But she gradually warmed up, especially when talking about her favorite topic...food. And so she became more than just the topic of an article; she became a friend.

“From the very beginning, Edna emphasized the importance of using fresh ingredients in her cooking. ‘Start with food that is fresh and of course supermarket food is not fresh, so you should grow your own garden,’ she would advise. She disdained modern conveniences such as food processors and the like and wouldn’t touch prepared, processed, or chemically preserved food. She said convection ovens ruin pastry. She turned up her nose at freezers adding we rely on refrigeration too much. She even distrusted hybrid seeds, saying they produce vegetables that look good, travel well, but taste like cardboard.

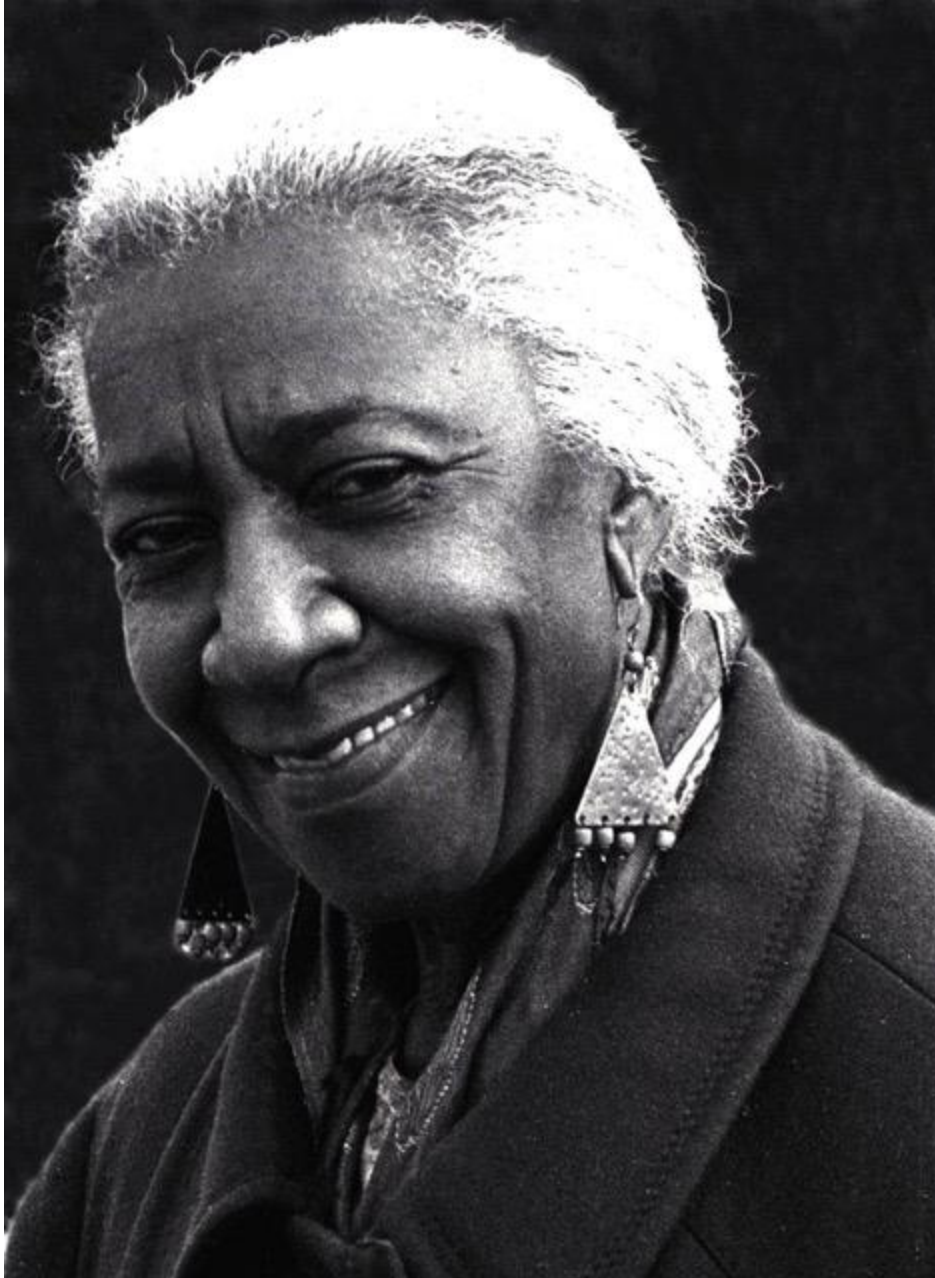
“So imagine my wife’s surprise when I glibly said to her one afternoon, ‘Guess who’s coming to dinner?’ Here we are, two thirty-somethings trying to cook dinner for the Doyenne of southern cooking, the cookbook author who gave American cuisine an identity, the champion of fresh ingredients!

“In those days Susie and I were doing more in the way of being self-sufficient than we do now. We were working an active farm, and had a garden, a pen full of laying hens and a milk cow from whom we actually occasionally hand-churned butter. So we weren’t living totally in the culinary Dark Ages, and we would definitely not have to run out to Kentucky Fried or haul out a Stouffers to feed Edna Lewis. But still...the pressure was on.

“I remember fetching Edna from her sister Jenny’s house near Lahore (Edna never drove). Back at our farm, we took her for a ride around the fields in an old farm wagon, towed by Ned, our erstwhile draft horse. Edna loved it, even taking the reins herself. That grin on her face and that faraway look in her eyes was a dead giveaway that she was back in Freetown as a little girl.

“Before dinner, I offered and she readily accepted a tumbler full of bourbon...neat. We served her locally shot venison, marinated in lemon juice, juniper berries and red wine. For dessert we served wild black raspberry cobbler. She loved it.

“We loved her, for we had never been made to feel so at ease in the presence of someone so great and so unassuming and unpretentious.”



--Photo Courtesy of Phil Audibert

Edna Lewis was born April 13, 1916 in Freetown, Orange, Virginia and died February 13, 2006 in Decatur, Georgia.

Three *YouTube* Documentaries celebrating Edna Lewis:

**“In the Season”** is a documentary by Phil and Susie Audibert and Ross Hunter of AHHA Productions that celebrates the remarkable life and legacy of “The Grande Dame of Southern Cooking”. The film, by Phil Audibert, traces her unique journey from a community founded by freed slaves in Orange, Virginia to a career that saw her gain acclaim around the world for her countless contributions to southern cuisine.

<https://youtu.be/vex1aAeunhA> (20:05 minutes long)

**“Fried Chicken and Sweet Potato Pie”** is a documentary by Bailey Barash of Edna Lewis’s life and the influence she had as a chef. *Edna Lewis, the African American granddaughter of freed slaves, grew up on a farm in Freetown, Virginia. Over her lifetime, she became known as one of the keepers of history, tradition and culture of true Southern cooking. Her writing and her recipes continue to guide chefs and cooks committed to using fresh, seasonal, regional food sources, no matter where they live.*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cl6JVMoMN44> (21:51 minutes long)

**“An Interview with Chef Edna Lewis”** An interview with Chef Edna Lewis is featured on Chef Joe Randall's website in his Hall of Fame section.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=34hEzh-D7Qo&t=1s> (10:11 minutes long)