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Barbecue Tofu and the Most Southern Food on Earth

by Michele Scott and Wanda Rushing

For as long as there has been a South, and people who think of themselves as Southerners, food has been central to the region's image, its personality, and its character. (John Egerton 1987, 2)

Southern food, including such delicacies as country ham, fried okra, biscuits, grits, and sweet tea, is central in the lives of southerners, not only those living in the South, but also those who live in other regions. When Krispy Kreme doughnuts expanded to New York, humorist Roy Blount, Jr. welcomed the sugary treats, saying: "Oh yeah, I been eating Krispy Kremes my entire life. Which is one reason my entire life may not last much longer—but they're good aren't they?" (2002, 106). The consumption of traditional Southern foodways, often associated with positive expressions of regional identity across class and race divisions, also raises questions about its role in the American battle against obesity, diabetes, and heart disease. The food described positively as a "unifier in a diverse region," also can be described negatively as an adversary in the pursuit of good health (Latshaw 2009).

Former President and Arkansan Bill Clinton, known for his legendary appetite for beef, barbecue, and fried foods, and a medical history that includes being overweight and having quadruple by-pass surgery, now shuns meat, dairy and eggs. His embrace of veganism is no more surprising than that of Mississippi-born bluesman B.B. King, a diabetic and spokesperson for *OneTouch Ultra* blood glucose tests, who now abstains from meat, fried foods, alco-

hol and sugar. Clinton and King, like many southerners, especially those in the Mid-South, have enjoyed traditional southern diets and suffered from health problems shared by many in the region. And though we may never know if his early exit was directly related to the fried peanut butter-banana-bacon sandwiches, the downward spiral suffered by Elvis Presley, the longstanding poster boy for southern culture, was not slowed by his dietary choices. Oprah Winfrey, contextualized by her "yo-yo" dieting and weight fluctuations almost as frequently as by her business savvy and success, has entrusted her more recent dietary changes to vegan chefs. According to "Oprah Winfrey Goes Vegan for 21 Days", a May 22, 2008 article posted on the *Today.com* website, she now attributes weight loss, general health, and "spiritual evolution" to a newfound consciousness of what goes into her body. Reflecting on her twenty-one day dietary regime in *O Magazine* online, she recognizes how these various components of overall well-being are affected by altering her traditional diet (Winfrey).

Food is much more than sustenance. It is a physical manifestation of culture, tradition, and history. Ferris (2009, 5) acknowledges food's "tenacious hold on regional identity," with "food and place remain[ing] indelibly linked." A popular Midwestern grocery store chain designates a "Southern" section, situated in the larger "ethnic foods" aisle, demonstrating the extent to which certain foods are stereotyped as "southern." Greens, beans, corn grits, and pre-mixed breadings are available in pre-packed, canned, and shelf-stable forms, for people living