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GATHER

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GATHER

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree Bachelor of Arts with

Honors College Graduate Distinction at Western Kentucky University

By:

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2015

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ABSTRACT

Food is both basic and multifaceted. It nourishes satisfies, levels, defines and gathers us. Food unifies and brings people together as part of the human experience. When people embrace food and make it their own, it can shape and define their lives in big ways.

Food can cultivate a lifestyle, preserve cultural identity, foster a small business, nurture relationships and serve a community.

This project is a documentation of five different groups of people that experience food in uniquely different ways. Through photo essays and written stories I strive to capture what how food brings people together in specific ways and what it means to them. To experience the full photo stories and the website that I coded and designed for this project please visit www.gatherphotoproject.com.

Keywords: Food, Community, Photojournalism, Cooking, Meals, Culture

For my mom, Mary Beth —
who taught me to love people & love food

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Most of all I want thank each person who let me tell their story and document their life for this project. I'm forever grateful for people opening their homes and telling their stories without reservation. It excites me that other people love food as much as I do and were willing to teach me what it meant to them along the way.

VITA

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2015.....	Presentation, WKU Student Research Conference

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Photojournalism

Minor Field: Entrepreneurship

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INTRODUCTION

If I could throw dinner parties every week with my favorite people sitting around the table, I'd be in heaven on earth. I love food and I'm always trying to learn more about it & how to cook it. I'm happiest when I sit down to the table, feed others and talk to people I love between finishing delicious bites of food.

I believe that every person should be able to feed themselves and the people that they love. I think that eating is much more than just about silencing our stomachs — preparing food and serving others bring nourishment to our spirits and well being. I think feeding people is one of the fundamental ways we can love them. Even though life is fast and frantic, sitting down for a meal acknowledges that we are not working machines and that we need nourishment from food and people we love. I also believe that the food we eat says a lot about us personally. Whether it's a reflection of our culture or personal choice — food often defines part of who we are.

“Gather” was born from my interest in wanting to document the ways that food brings people together and see firsthand what food means to people and how they use food in their everyday lives. I'm in awe how food is a universal language that is uniting and defining at the same time. I found five uniquely different groups of people and sought to

document how and why they share a meal — in an effort to learn how something so simple can be very different in each and everyone's lives.

CHAPTER 1

CULTIVATE

A foot of snow blanketed the ground, yet fifty animals needed to be fed and watered. With one five pound bucket full of boiling water in each hand, Wes and Elisa Berry trudged through their back yard to begin their morning chores.

After feeding baby lambs, giving rabbits fresh water and collecting eggs from the chicken coop they were caught up for a few hours.

The Berry homestead in Russellville, Kentucky was forged from a shared desire to live lightly and be close to the land. Wes and Elisa led lives of self-sufficiency and obtained most of their meals from their own backyard.

Wes hailed from several generations of farmers and spent his childhood raising tobacco crops and eating home cured hogs. Growing up in Barren County, at the age of five he did what he could to help his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather on the farm in any way.

“I think a lot of the people who do this work kind of have it in their bones since youth,” he said. “I’ve always been kind of nostalgic for farm life.”

During his time in graduate school, he began asking himself how he could lower his environmental footprint and what it would take to raise his own animals.

Until he meet Elisa, these thoughts weren't a reality in his own life. He knew a lot about farming methods and the lifestyle he wanted, but Elisa's shared interest pushed him to take the plunge into homesteading.

After the pair married, they acquired a few more animals than the chickens Wes had at the farm as a bachelor.

With the addition of rabbits, sheep, and pigs came the opportunity to learn how to butcher and preserve their own meat. The Berrys also grew a substantial amount of their own produce from their backyard garden. In the spring and summer months, there was lettuce, asparagus, blackberries and other fruits and vegetables abounding.

On one of the first warm spring days, after the foot of March snow melted, the Berrys slaughtered eight of their rabbits.

Twelve weeks had passed since the rabbits were born — after eating lots of alfalfa, they reached an eight-pound weight that made them an ideal size for eating. Weighing less meant minimal meat and being much heavier would made tough or fatty meat.

The Berrys had the most experience butchering rabbits in comparison to sheep or pigs. Their process was efficient, careful and calm. Wes shot and bled the rabbits before handing them off to Elisa to skin and save the meat.

By playing to their strengths and splitting up the work, the process was made less emotional and more task focused. Elisa explained that there was still an amount of sadness involved with seeing animals they've raised turn into food for the table.

“You should get attached to some degree, you want to know the animals and know that they are taken care of,” Elisa said.

The process was taxing and difficult, but resulted in lean meat that would feed them for months. All of their efforts paid off. In confidence, they were able to have their food — knowing where it came from, how it was treated, what it was fed and even how it was killed.

Once their meat and produce made it to their kitchen the real magic happened. Between their separate travels and knowledge of different cuisines, the Berrys mutually had a vast repertoire of recipes and know-how in the kitchen.

“Combined, we both cook a hell of a lot of stuff together,” he said. “We're both adventurous eaters at the table.”

From Xinxiang lamb ribs to Spanish paella and even rabbit and dumplings, Wes and Elisa were creative and always willing to experiment with new dishes. They were also experts when it came to the perfect cup of coffee and southern breakfast.

On a bright and early morning after feeding the animals, Elisa sliced a country ham they raised while Wes used his mother's technique for making the perfect biscuits. Eggs from their chicken coop slowly sizzled in a cast iron skillet while the smell of rich coffee swirled throughout the kitchen.

Sharing meals together from their own small-scale farm was where the process came to fruition and their dreams for so many years became a beautiful reality.



Figure 1.1: Wes Berry

CHAPTER 2

PRESERVE

I slipped off my boots and laid them with nearly 20 other pairs of shoes neatly arranged on the front stoop. Greeted by the aroma of ginger and many pairs of smiling eyes, I walked into the crowded kitchen.

“I’m so sorry about the smell,” one of the girls was quick to point out and apologize for.

She was one of four young girls sitting around a long plastic table turned into a massive cutting board. They were chopping hundreds of garlic cloves and peeling ginger roots at 10 a.m. on a Saturday.

The men in the house were each taking a stab at cracking open a pile of coconuts. As soon as someone would successfully break a shell, another boy close by would reach out with a bowl — careful to catch every drop of coconut milk before it hit the ground.

All of this in preparation for Htamanae — a traditional harvest festival on the Burmese calendar every February. They were preparing ingredients and dishes to take to the temple for the next day’s celebration.

The girls were experienced and efficient, peeling at a pace so fast that I'd be sure to accidentally cut myself. They shared conversations in their native tongue and giggled back and forth across the table.

As I made my way around the room, I couldn't help but note collaborative effort taking place. Sure, I've helped my mom cook before when she needed me — but I'd never seen more than ten pairs of hands doing the dirty work in the kitchen.

They were all working together and enjoying the process. I started to understand the sense of pride they had for what they were making and its purpose.

After a quick lunch break — where they insisted it was fine if I didn't eat with my hands and gave me a fork to eat “the American way” — we visited the temple to deliver lunch to the monk of their Buddhist temple.

The two boys and I went to the temple to serve the monk lunch. After standing while the monk was eating alone, I learned that you must wait for him to complete his meal and then clean his plate setting.

Less than twelve hours later, I was back at the temple for the festival. There were several families who arrived early to help prepare the temple and plate the food. The women covered the floor of the temple in mats and rolled out several tables that sat low to the

ground. The htamanae was being boxed up for families to take home and also portioned out of a cooler to serve during the meal.

Slowly but surely, families continued to trickle in — eventually packing the main room in the temple to maximum capacity. Each family brought dishes with them to contribute to the meal and the table of food grew larger with each new arrival.

The room was full of hugs and reunions of people reconnecting. Zaw Oo, one of the boys I had met the day before, told me that in Buddhism you can come to the temple any time you please — a large coordinated event like this was rare and brought many people together.

Everything settled down when the monk entered the room and gathered everyone around the main table to pray over the food. During the prayer ritual, everyone circled around the table offering at least one hand in to help lift the table off the ground in unison as the monk prayed.

The monk was served first and everyone waited as he ate his meal. After he finished, the women and children filled their plates and then the men took their share.

I sat with an older woman who insisted on preparing my plate and letting me try lots of different meats and vegetables. We passed rice, spicy fish and soups around the table

making sure everyone had their fill. Everything I put in my mouth was delicious and like nothing I've ever had before.

I tasted so many unique and flavorful dishes that I couldn't keep up with what I was eating. More importantly, I was able to taste a bit of Burmese culture in America and see how they are preserving their cultural identity in a new space through people, religion and food.



Figure 2.1: Festival Prayer

CHAPTER 3

FOSTER

Jackson Rolett stood crouching between rows of radishes, hunting for the weekly harvest. Dirt lived deeply under his nails, overalls covered the length of his long body, sleeves of tattoos decorated his arms and a beanie rested on top of his long hair. He asked his wife, Jordan, a few rows over what greens she will be picking for the week.

The Roletts are not stereotypical farmers.

Tucked far away from city streets, down a gravel driveway in Halfway, Kentucky sat Hickory Lane Farm. The Rolett family shared a portion of Nathan and Michelle Howell's land to sustain their "Think Little CSA."

Community Supported Agriculture was a popular way for consumers to obtain local food from farmers that was fresh and in season. Customers acted as shareholders who invested in the cost of the farm upfront, then reaped the rewards through baskets of fresh produce every week throughout the year.

The Roletts had been farming with the Howells for over a year and began serving their own CSA customers in October 2014. They were keeping their reach small and provided food for 20 families, as well as putting food on their own table.

“The bigger you get, the more removed you get from the farm,” Jackson said. “I always want to be intimately involved with what’s being grown. [Our motto is] Take what’s enough for you and then find ways to provide for other people.”

Last year after ‘too much reading and not enough doing’, Jackson and Jordan’s shared interest in locally sourced food access led them to take the plunge into quitting their day jobs and becoming full-time farmers.

“It’s an exciting time to be farming,” Jackson said. “This whole foods movement isn’t a status symbol anymore.”

The Roletts also helped to make food available to lower income families through the double dollars program at the Community Farmer’s Market in Bowling Green and by working with Hotel Inc. to provide local produce to their food bank.

Nothing was wasted. Whether it’s sold, donated, or cooked in their own kitchen — everything was of value and has purpose. They put the very best produce on their customer’s tables and often took the less beautiful items and cooked them up in their own kitchen.

About two miles down the road from Hickory Lane Farm, the Roletts called a small white farmhouse home. Jordan's favorite room in their humble abode was their kitchen, the biggest room in the house. On a Wednesday morning in March, the light poured in through long windows over the sink. They took turns holding their son, Avery, while making breakfast and cups of coffee.

It was their day off from farming, which meant a much a slower start to the day — different from their usual planting and harvesting routine.

Jordan chopped and sautéed sweet potatoes, collard greens, onions and garlic — all the same items they distributed to their CSA customers the previous day.

“Farm life has always been the background of my family, but I'm interested in this because of the food,” Jordan said. “I'm interested in cooking well and using good ingredients.”

The Roletts would never be hungry for fresh and wholesome ingredients. As the seasons changed and their winter produce was almost picked clean, new little seedlings went into the ground and the cycle began again.

Rows of lettuce, kale, bok choy and other vegetables were planted as far as the eye could see. The long days of getting seedlings into the ground were over and now all that's left to do was sit back and have faith that it will grow.

“The hard part is done,” Jackson said. “Now I look at it all and feel relieved because all we have to do is keep it alive.”

The Roletts were doing much more than keeping plants alive. They were running their own business, putting local food into people's hands, doing hard farm labor, and feeding their own family through it all.



Figure 3.1: Harvesting Kale

CHAPTER 4

NURTURE

In a worn green house lived three refrigerators, one bathroom, a deep front porch, two couches, thirteen women and a lot of love. Some chose to live there and others were mandated by the court, but they all slept under the same roof for one reason — to become sober.

From 20 to 57 years old, each woman had a different story and was a working part of the Freedom House. They helped each other flourish.

Between frequent meetings, sharing the same roof, and cooking meals together, the women learned how to care for each other and welcome in new women. Because of the nature of the six-month placement, women came and went — rotating rooms and sharing new stories.

“The first thing we do when a new girl moves in is feed her,” Freedom House resident, Catrina said.

Food was a common denominator that gave the women a way to relate and comfort one another. Sitting down over a meal gave them a chance to share their stories and level the playing field with an offering of food.

“If we could have a before photo when we came in and an after when we came out, you could tell we love food here,” Freedom House resident, Sally said.

Once a month Karen Rediess, Director of the Freedom House, handed \$60 to two women assigned with the task of cooking a meal for the whole house.

The duty of feeding everyone rotated between pairs and fell in the hands of Sally and Catrina in March. Being two of the oldest women in the house, they often felt like the mothers and weren't phased by the task of feeding and taking care of everyone.

Four women squeezed into a small, cluttered car, with windows down, stereo loud and cigarettes lit as they headed to IGA to pick up ingredients for the ultimate comfort food — lasagna.

Sally and Catrina made their way up and down the aisles, finding the best deals and filling up the cart with necessary ingredients. List in hand, they found and agreed on every item together, hoping they'd come in under \$60.

They waited patiently and expectantly as the teenage girl behind the cash register rang up their items. When she announced the total of \$59.32 there were laughs and high fives shared all around. Sally & Catrina proudly walked to the car and made space in the trunk for their bags.

Once they arrived back at the Freedom House, several other women came outside to lend a hand with the bags and lessen the load. Despite being gone for an hour, Sally was hugged at least three times on her way inside the house.

After a quick smoke break, Sally and Catrina got settled in the kitchen and started dividing up chopping, rinsing, mixing and sautéing duties. The two always choose to cook together when the monthly meal was offered up and came back around to one of them.

“I’d rather have Sally in the kitchen with me than anyone,” said Catrina. “We’re a good team, we know how to work well together.”

For the next few hours the kitchen never fell silent or still. The radio played top hits as Sally and Catrina were constantly shoos women out of the kitchen to give themselves more space to cook. Living in a house with 13 women, it’s hard to ever have space to yourself, Catrina explained.

After all of the ingredients had been cooked, Catrina started layering the lasagna and singing her own praises of how great their creation was going to taste.

“This could be straight out of *Southern Living*,” Catrina said. “Watch out Rachel Ray.”

Everyone in the house was counting down the minutes until dinner would be served. The huge pans didn’t make it in the oven until after 7 p.m. and needed to be baked for nearly an hour.

Timeliness wasn’t of the essence at the Freedom House. Without cars, cell phones, computers and other distractions the women focused their time on one another and turning their lives around.

When dinner was served, a line formed down the long hallway. Sally directed everyone through the kitchen and Catrina served heaping portions of her Mexican lasagna to her other roommates.

Bodies squeezed back into the living room and made space for seating in every open space. Compliments echoed across the room to Sally and Catrina between nearly every bite. Gratitude was the theme of the room and the meal.



Figure 4.1: Preparing Dinner

CHAPTER 5

SERVE

Joe Jackson stood sweating over two hot fryers as fans blew in from every direction. Waitresses ran in and out of the kitchen grabbing more catfish and french fries to fill orders. Every few minutes someone new ran in to announce “the line’s out the door,” which was never a surprise.

Boyce General Store, a small country store in Boyce, Kentucky, sat far off the beaten path. It neighbored many farms and remained a relatively quiet destination during the week, despite the lunch crowd.

Fridays were a different story.

Boyce General Store kept their doors opened on Friday nights and it turned into the place to be to experience more than just a meal. For most customers, the drive to the store took at least 30 minutes and waiting in line to order could take that long as well. Week after week the Friday night fish fry brought hundreds of people flocking to the old country store.

Most of the customers had come to know and love the face behind the fried fish that kept them coming back. For the last two years, Joe was the “fry-daddy” and “king of catfish” at Boyce.

“When I go into town, people know me from out here. People support me by eating here,” said Joe. “I’ve actually arrived to the store before and had people start cheering because I was there.”

Between frying batches of catfish, Joe ran out to the tables and greeted nearly all of the faces in the store. He handed out handshakes and hugs before heading back to the kitchen to pull fish out of the fryers.

Another customer popped his head in the kitchen before leaving to thank Joe. Joe walked the man outside to say goodbye to he and his wife. As he made an appearance outside people began clapping and thanking him for his hard work.

“Seeing a smile on people’s faces when they eat something I’ve made, that’s why I cook,” Joe said.

This all began as a way to help out. When Boyce General Store was first starting out, Joe volunteered in their kitchen. Living in the community of Boyce, he wanted to help and use his love of cooking. Once the owners realized what an asset he was, they hired him on full time to help on Friday nights to do what he does best.

“Food defined me here, food gave me this job,” Joe said. “The thing you enjoy doing, you do it out of love, not pay.”

Joe’s primary income came from a car manufacturing plant in Bowling Green. He headed to Boyce to work on Fridays after finishing work at the plant.

“People give me a hard time, that I have to go fry food after work,” Joe said. “But they don’t get it, they don’t get that I want to do this.”

The love of cooking ran deep in his family. When he was 9 years old, his mother, who made sure he would never have to depend on a woman to make all of his meals, taught him to cook. Coincidentally, he married a woman who loved to cook as much as him.

Marcia and Joe share almost 30 years of marriage and meals together. They have combined their repertoires of recipes and together make many southern dishes that have been passed down through multiple generations of their families.

Making a meal in their house was a smooth and shared experience. They split up the tasks so they each got to do their favorite things. Joe fried chicken and Marcia whipped up her secret recipe for sweet potato pie.

Every weekend on Saturday or Sunday, the pair spend hours of laboring in the kitchen to share a meal together. To the Jacksons, it was worth the time and energy when they got to sit down and enjoy what they've created.

“Most people don't like cooking because it takes too long and they don't want to work and wait,” Marcia said.

The joy of cooking and serving others was sure to live on in the Jackson home — whether was serving 255 hungry mouths at Boyce General Store or sharing a meal a loved one.



Figure 5.1: Fish Fry