

How one academically grounded nonprofit impacts economies, changes lives, and drives progress in the changing American South.

SEPTEMBER 2018



Thrive



Foreword

On a warm day in July of 1999, three dozen chefs, cooks, writers, and academics met in Birmingham, Alabama, to found a nonprofit that would document, study, and explore the diverse food cultures of the changing American South.

That night they dined on rabbit pilau at Highlands Bar and Grill, the restaurant owned by Frank and Pardis Stitt that helped kindle the American regional food renaissance.

Since that first gathering two decades ago, the Southern Foodways Alliance has become a powerful force at the intersection of food, culture, history, and fellowship. When SFA showcases a cook, farmer, or artisan, media coverage often spikes significantly. Many members credit the support and collective wisdom of the SFA for thriving careers and businesses.

Members are drawn to the spiritual sanctuary of SFA events, where they feel both nurtured and challenged. Many say that SFA media and programming has driven seismic shifts in their thinking about identity and their relationship to the region.

SFA boldly explores the complex and often treacherous history of the South, delving into slavery, poverty, hunger, and the oppression of women, minorities, immigrants, and LGBTQ people. SFA dives into these loaded subjects with academic rigor, solemnity, joy, and a relentless drive to cultivate a better future while chronicling a tragic past.

This work was independently commissioned, researched, and written. Financial support for research came from Brook and Pam Smith of Louisville, Kentucky, who wanted to document the unique DNA of the Southern Foodways Alliance and the ways the organization creates value and impacts lives across the South and beyond.

The SFA community generously shared their stories and insights through more than 50 hours of interviews. Thanks to Kristie Abney, Rosalind Bentley, Scott Blackwell, Ashley Christensen, Theresa Chu, Mark Essig, Marcie Cohen Ferris, Asha Gomez, Will Harris, Meherwan Irani, Sam Jones, Ann Marshall, Nancie McDermott, Angie Mosier, Justin Nystrom, Julian Rankin, Ashanté Reese, Rodney Scott, Pardis Stitt, and Sean Wilson for sharing.

SFA leadership was also gracious with interviews and data, and for that I thank John T. Edge, Melissa Hall, Mary Beth Lassetter, and the rest of the folks who keep SFA running.

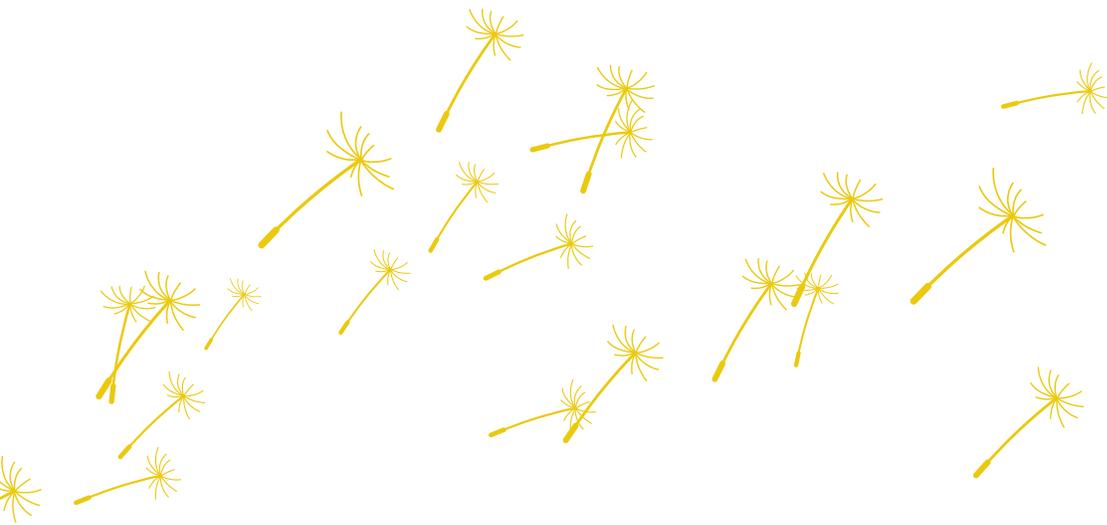
Any errors, omissions and oversights are solely mine.

Mary Jane Credeur
Decatur, GA
September 2018



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I. 'We Are One'

Since elementary school, Rodney Scott has worked in the family business, feeding logs of hardwood into burn barrels to make coals over which whole hogs roast for 12 hours or more.

For years, people have been driving from all over South Carolina to the rural town of Hemingway for a plate from Scott's Bar-B-Que, set in a cinderblock building painted white and trimmed in robin's egg blue.

In 2009, John T. Edge, the director of the Southern Foodways Alliance, wrote a column about Scott's Bar-B-Que for *The New York Times*. In it, he praised the "ever-elusive authenticity" of their slow-smoked whole hog barbecue.

The article ran on Wednesday, June 10, when Scott's was closed. They only cooked on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday back then. When the restaurant opened for its usual hours that week, sales jumped at least 20% and maybe more – Scott doesn't remember for sure because the restaurant didn't use a point-of-sale system at the time.

"That changed our entire lives. The piece ran in the morning and the phone line was busy all day long. It just rang and rang," Scott said.

Shortly after the *Times* piece, the SFA produced a short film "Cut/Chop/Cook" by Joe York—a nod to the cutting and chopping of wood followed by all-night cooking of the hogs. The film was shown during the 2010 Big Apple Barbecue Block Party in New York City, at which Scott cooked the food he knew best.

"Someone shook my hand and said 'Thank you for the work you do,'" Scott said, recalling the New York City event. "And I was like 'Wow, they respect it.'"

Other media outlets began to take notice, and Scott started receiving invitations to cook at events all over the South. By then, sales at Scott's were up by more than 50% since Edge wrote the article in *The New York Times*, Scott said.

When the restaurant's pithouse burned in 2013, a group of SFA friends including Nick Pihakis of Jim 'N Nick's Bar-B-Q and Sam Jones of Skylight Inn BBQ (they call themselves the "Fatback Collective") rallied and helped him devise a plan to rebuild. Scott visited several cities across the South and cooked whole hogs to raise money, and his journey was chronicled by NPR, Charleston's The Post and Courier, The Local Palate and others.

Articles mentioning Rodney Scott rose tenfold from just five in 2011 to 69 in 2017, according to Factiva, the Dow Jones data service that scours thousands of print and digital media publications.

In 2017, Scott opened his own place in Charleston, South Carolina: Rodney Scott's BBQ. The advice and wisdom freely given from close friends in SFA was clutch, he says.

Pihakis invested in the enterprise, and also convinced Scott to start using a point-of-sale system by Square to track data on top-selling items and supplies, and also integrate with bookkeeping and accounting systems.

"Instead of guessing how many hogs we need on a Wednesday, I can check the system and it tells me," Scott said. "It shows me how many pounds of meat come off the hog, how much red pepper we're going through, how many pots of sauce we use per week. It takes the mental pressure off me. Waste is down. And profits are a lot higher."

Fellow pitmaster Jones, who recently branched out from his family's Ayden, North Carolina-based restaurant Skylight Inn to open Sam Jones BBQ, had this to say: Brace for the one-star reviews on Yelp.

Sooner or later it will happen, Jones warned. Maybe someone was cranky that day or just being mean spirited. Ignore those people. And if something was legitimately wrong, make it right. No matter what, don't let it drag you down, Jones said.

It was profound advice to Scott, who was still finding his footing as a sole proprietor after a lifetime under the umbrella of a family-run enterprise that offered both protection and constraints. It also spoke to an undercurrent of doubt about striking out on his own and getting comfortable with the pressure and scrutiny that comes with the spotlight: Am I good enough?

In May of 2018, Scott became the first African-American to win a James Beard Foundation Award for Best Chef Southeast, and only the second barbecue pitmaster ever to win a chef award.

“For me to be compared to people who are at 5-star resorts, places like Blackberry Farm, I just can’t believe it,” Scott said. “I always thought we were divided. But some of those chefs were looking at me like, ‘Wow, you stayed up all night and cooked this beast and put it on a plate.’”

That win helped Scott realize that there is just as much merit in his kind of cooking as that of any fine dining chef.

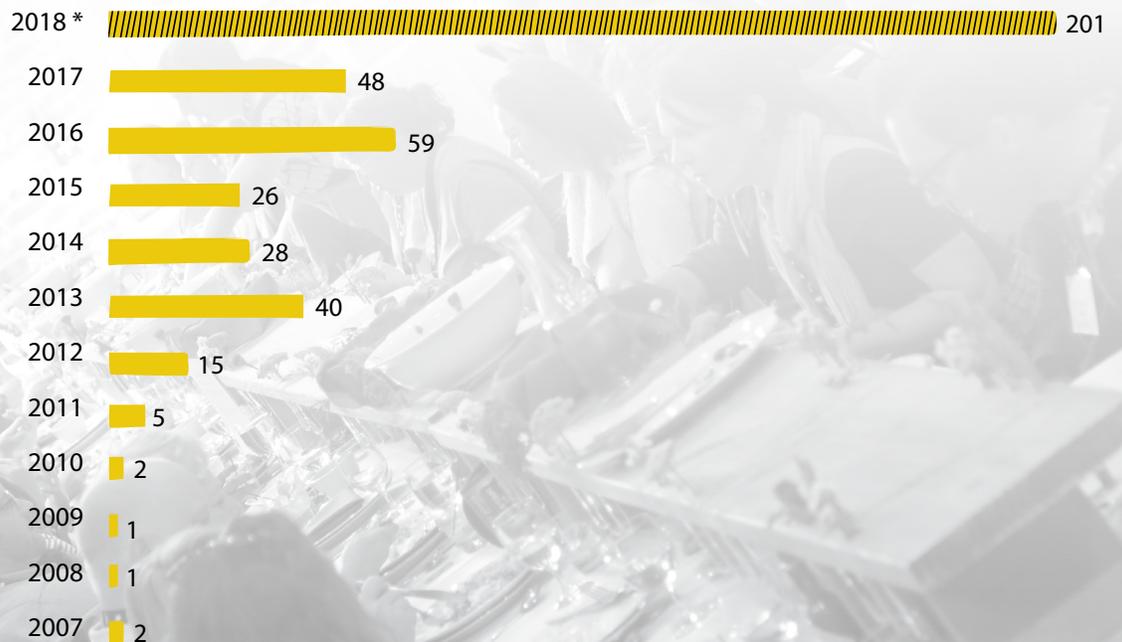
“We are all the same. We are one. I’m starting to accept that a little bit more,” Scott says, referencing a smooth R&B track by Frankie Beverly & Maze called “We Are One.” He often cranks that track when he’s tending the pits.

Days after the James Beard win, Scott announced plans to open a second location in Birmingham, Alabama, in partnership with Pihakis, a longtime SFA supporter who sold Jim ‘N Nick’s to Atlanta private equity firm Roark Capital Group in 2017.

Media mentions of Rodney Scott jumped nearly threefold in the first eight months of 2018 compared to the same period a year earlier, Factiva data show.

Scott credits SFA for giving him time and space to nurture his relationships with Pihakis, Jones, and dozens of other restaurant leaders and writers across the nation. Without them, he says he probably wouldn’t have had the courage and the means to go out on his own.

Rodney Scott Media Coverage



*BAR CHARTS THROUGHOUT INCLUDE FULL-YEAR 2018 PROJECTIONS BASED ON FACTIVA FIGURES YEAR-TO-DATE THROUGH 8/27/2018.

II. Measuring Impact

Scott's ascendancy is an example of the rising influence of the SFA, which is now a major player at the nexus of history, culture, and progress.

Although food may seem central to SFA work, it's really more of an entry point for contemplation, exploration, and discourse. People flock to SFA to learn from experts, and also from each other through casual conversations over cocktails or lunch.

They look forward to getting the newest edition of *Gravy*, SFA's quarterly award-winning journal, and listening to the latest episode of the podcast, also called *Gravy*. They watch the short films and documentaries SFA commissions, and attend oral history and film workshops hosted by SFA. When a fellow member publishes a book, they organize or attend author signing parties. When an SFA member restaurant hosts a fundraiser event, they drive for hours or book plane tickets to attend and show their support.

Intense social bonding happens at SFA events, when busy restaurateurs, farmers, writers, and academics, who normally have a hard time peeling away from day jobs, carve out a few days to spend with peers. They share insights and tips, support each other through struggles, and celebrate triumphs.

Active members trust each other so much that they invite people they may have only met a few times to sleep in their spare bedrooms when they're out of town.

Members will open up to a stranger introduced by an SFA leader and share personal stories about painful family dynamics, failed business ventures, and the impacts of racism. They do this with complete faith that if SFA trusts this new person, then they should too.

In a conversation about career trajectories, members often name a handful of close SFA friends who have had an impact on their business.

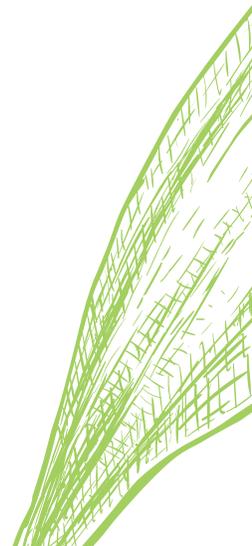
Often they join fellow SFA members at food and wine festivals or SFA events, and they drop in for visits with SFA friends when they travel across the region and nation. They go out of their way to stay in touch with each other, texting about something funny or asking advice. A tight web of influence and trust connects members.

"They're like summer camps for grown-ups," Angie Mosier, who owns an Atlanta food styling and photography company called Placemat Productions, says of SFA events. "People you've known for so long, people you love, and you're so excited to see them. It's the best kind of fellowship."

The community extends far beyond events.

"We're mostly head down and working; the restaurant business is all-consuming," said Pardis Stitt of Birmingham, who along with her husband, Frank Stitt, owns Highlands Bar & Grill and sister restaurants Chez Fonfon, Bottega, and Bottega Café. "So many of my adult friendships are because of SFA. Writers, chefs, people we would never meet or see otherwise."

That kind of fidelity is rare among nonprofits. Supporters of a community food bank, the Southern Poverty Law Center, or local chapters of organizations such as Habitat for Humanity don't usually know each other so intimately or have such weighty professional influence on each other.



SFA has created intense loyalty to the organization, which impacts its financial success and stability.

SFA now counts 1,875 souls as members and reaches a much broader audience through social media: 44,000 Facebook followers, 45,000 Instagram followers, 35,000 Twitter followers, and 47,000 unique monthly website visitors. The annual budget is \$1.4 million excluding events, which are designed to roughly break even.

Only 5% of the budget comes from membership dues. Philanthropy funds the organization. The largest single source is an auction, hosted each January by Blackberry Farm, that yields \$200,000 or more each year.

One donor has made two \$1 million gifts to SFA operations, and another has made a \$1.25 million contribution. More than 20 donors have made gifts in the \$25,000 to \$100,000 range, and gifts in this range have consistently gotten larger and more frequent over time. SFA operations are largely underwritten by donations from companies including Billy Reid, Lodge Manufacturing, Royal Cup Coffee, and McIlhenny Company, the maker of Tabasco®.

At SFA's core is scholarship and an academic grounding that underpins all of its work. All work is richly researched and contains historical context, and oral histories and documentary films capture the circumstances of the subject's upbringing and family history, plus the corresponding political, economic, cultural, and social climates that defined an era.

Although it could publish its books through any house, SFA leaders choose to publish through an academic press in partnership with the University of Georgia. Every part of its programming is original and deeply considered, and events are populated with thinkers and scholars from across many academic disciplines who try to make their material engaging even when the audience

might not be fond of footnotes. Even meals are planned so that they are contextually appropriate.

SFA is an institute of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi. It is housed in the central rotunda at Barnard Observatory, not far from the Circle where a deadly 1962 riot erupted in protest of the admission of the first African-American student.

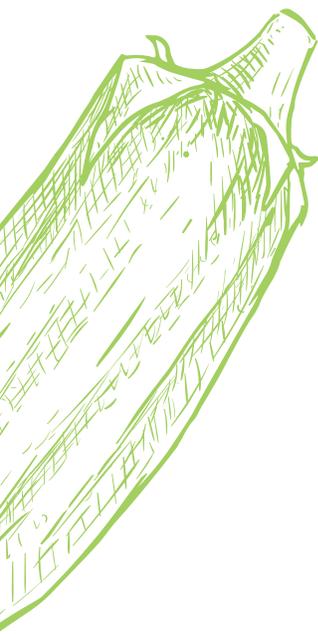
The University benefits from a symbiotic relationship with SFA in which academic rigor, cachet, and media attention flow both ways. The school manages finances, human resources, healthcare, and retirement benefits for SFA staff.

To give back, and to drive foodways scholarship, SFA has endowed two faculty positions. One of those professors, Catarina Passidomo, received a Fulbright US Scholar award in 2018 to travel to Peru to teach and conduct research on post-colonial Peruvian foodways and how cuisine helped establish a nation-brand. SFA funds two Nathalie Dupree Graduate Fellows, and by 2020 SFA will endow a senior leadership position in its own organization.

"Think of the great programs that bring attention to the university, and pound for pound SFA is a tremendous bargain," said Justin Nystrom, an associate professor of history at Loyola University in New Orleans, Director of the Center for the Study of New Orleans, and SFA member and contributor.

"SFA raises its own money and brings all this really positive attention to the university. It's hard to quantify it, but you know it's there. There is enormous return on investment on what they're doing."

With its professionally produced and academically-focused content, one could mistake SFA for a digital media company that happens to be a nonprofit.



Managing Editor Sara Camp Milam directs SFA content creation, with assistance from a team of contract writers, editors, designers, and other contributors. SFA's lead oral historian Annemarie Anderson manages a team of contract oral historians who are paid well for their work.

SFA media products cover many genres.

The Gravy podcast has been downloaded more than 2.4 million times as of August 2018. The professionally designed, edited and produced *Gravy* publication typically runs 70-plus pages of essays, poetry, personal opinion, journalism, and occasional recipes. The James Beard Foundation named *Gravy*, the collective print and podcast forms, publication of the year in 2015.

SFA has gathered nearly 1,000 oral histories over the years, and, has produced 125 documentary films. SFA films have screened on PBS across the nation, and at film festivals such as the Nashville Film Festival, the Sidewalk Film Festival in Birmingham, and Indie Grits in Columbia, South Carolina.

SFA media is so well produced that Marcie Cohen Ferris often incorporates it into her curriculum at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where she taught in the American Studies department before retiring in 2018. SFA encourages use of its materials and while many academic producers charge usage fees, SFA grants free classroom usage and distributes all content digitally at no cost.

“I am constantly pulling up and showing SFA content in class. It supports my scholarship and my teaching,” said Ferris, author of *The Edible South*. “Everything resonates because it’s excellent, well produced, well designed. Students, if they look at it and think it’s a lame website or bad technology or bad film quality, they tune out. The quality of everything is really good.”

SFA compensates those writers, directors, and producers well. The organization also invests in future contributors through writing workshops, oral history workshops, film workshops, and graduate student symposia.

The 2018 releases of SFA's book series with the University of Georgia Press included *Catfish Dream* by Julian Rankin about African-American catfish farmer and processor Ed Scott's fight for his family farm and racial justice and Mississippi Delta, and *Creole Italian* by Loyola's Nystrom, about how Sicilian immigrants shaped New Orleans food culture.

A book of poetry titled *Vinegar & Char*, edited by Sandra Beasley, debuted in the fall of 2018, showing the breadth and range of what Southern foodways means. This sort of work is a defining difference for the SFA. How many other food-focused nonprofits publish books of poetry?

SFA hosts dozens of events each year including the Fall Symposium, which was founded in 1998, a year before SFA itself came into existence. In 2012, when the theme was barbeque, the event sold out less than a minute after ticket sales were announced. Two years later, when the theme was race relations, the Fall Symposium sold out in less than 30 seconds. To meet the demand, SFA added a Winter Symposium and has increased the size of the Summer Symposium.

The SFA's biggest impact is arguably the exposure it generates for the often unknown or little-known cooks, restaurateurs, farmers, and artisans featured in SFA podcast episodes, films, oral histories, journal articles, and at events.

Careers and businesses often flourish after attention from SFA. That impact extends to the writers, historians, and archivists who gather and produce material for the SFA.

Rosalind Bentley, a journalist at the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* and a SFA contributor and member, recently completed a Master of Fine Arts in narrative nonfiction from the University of Georgia, where Edge was her mentor.

In 2017, she reported and produced a Gravy podcast and wrote a companion print Gravy article about her great aunt Lucille Burton, a Civil Rights movement activist who fed and housed young men and women at her home in Albany, Georgia.

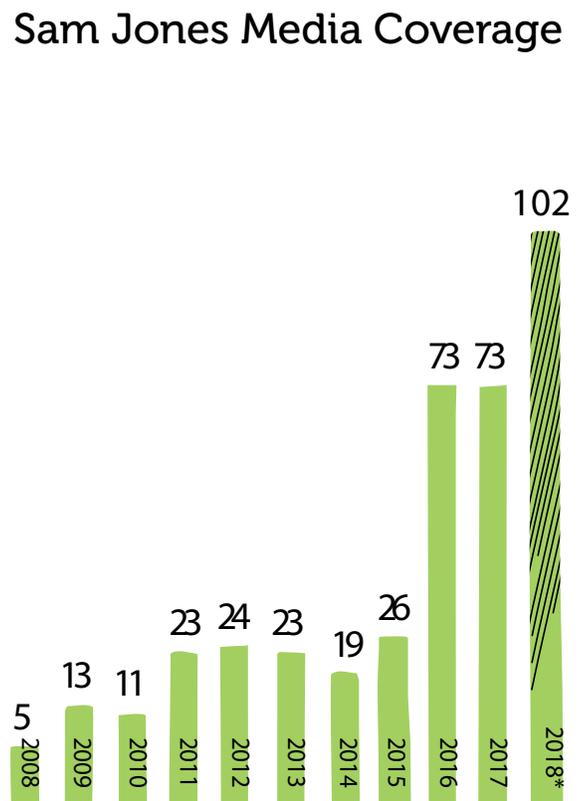
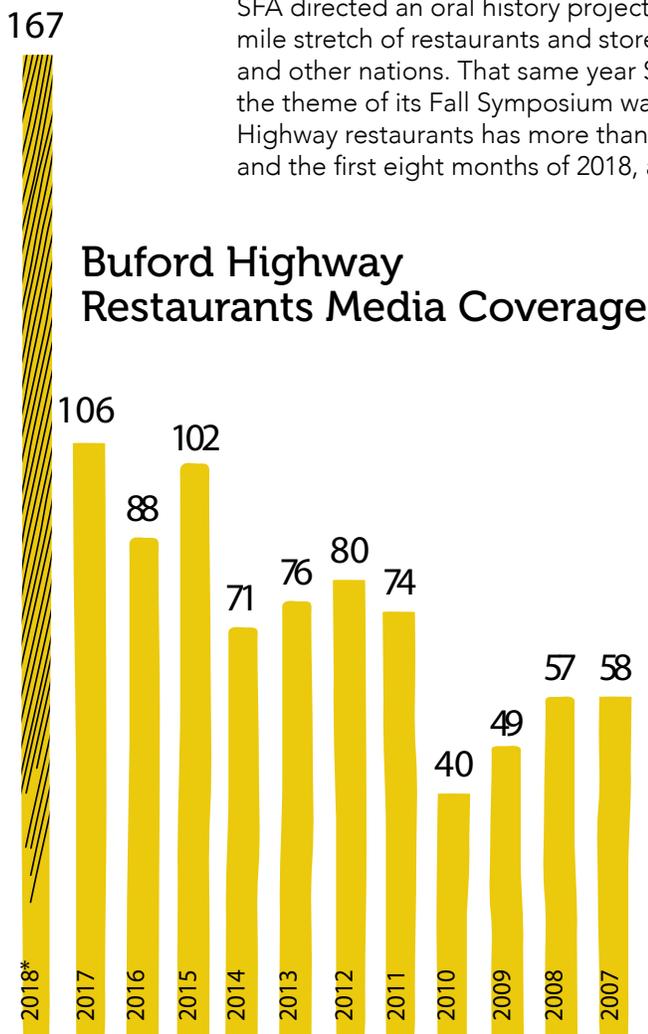
Bentley says the joy and fulfillment that came from that project, coupled with support from Edge and other SFA colleagues, encouraged her to advance plans to write a book and reach new audiences.

“When you’re doing the work you should be doing, there’s nothing better,” Bentley said.

Media coverage of barbecue pitmaster Sam Jones has more than tripled since an SFA-commissioned short film about him debuted in 2014, from about 20 media mentions per year to more than 70 each of the past two years, Factiva data show. Through August of 2018, Sam Jones has already accrued 68 stories, meaning media attention is on track to double for the year. The momentum has helped drive traffic to his new restaurant, where sales were up by double digits in the first half of the year.

“There would be no Sam Jones BBQ without SFA,” Jones said. “I would still be the guy making your sandwich and slaw, but I wouldn’t be doing it at the Charleston Wine and Food Festival or Big Apple or any of these other places without SFA.”

SFA directed an oral history project in 2010 on Atlanta’s diverse Buford Highway corridor, a 30-mile stretch of restaurants and stores run by immigrants from Mexico, Korea, China, El Salvador, and other nations. That same year SFA staged a Summer Symposium on Buford Highway, and the theme of its Fall Symposium was The Global South. Since then, media coverage of Buford Highway restaurants has more than doubled from about 40 articles to more than 100 in each 2017 and the first eight months of 2018, according to Factiva.



III. Super Spreaders

Joining SFA doesn't mean carte blanche access to writers, chefs, and other industry power players. To become a part of the fabric of SFA, members say you must have your heart and your head in the right place and adopt the inclusive and giving spirit that is SFA's lifeblood.

That may mean helping organize events, booking tables at fundraiser dinners, attending festivals where SFA films are screened, showing up for author signings when SFA members publish books, or simply staying active in the SFA calendar of events.

People don't—or shouldn't—join SFA to generate business. But that's often a byproduct of being active in the organization. SFA members are quick to refer business to each other, call on each other for recommendations, or ask for help. It's a trusted and vetted network of people who have already passed muster with other respected members.

Asha Gomez once ran a luxury spa business in Atlanta that also served healthy meals as part of the experience. It folded during the 2008-09 financial crisis, but clients kept talking about the terrific food. When she opened a restaurant called Cardamom Hill, her mother's fried chicken was a bestseller.

An invitation to cook at the SFA's 2013 Fall Symposium made her a nervous wreck, until friend and fellow SFA member Anne Quatrano of Bacchanalia and Star Provisions in Atlanta offered to help. Among other dishes, Gomez cooked chicken country captain, a curry dish served with rice that has roots in her native India and has long been popular in her adopted Georgia.

"You walk into a room and 400 people get to their feet and give you thunderous applause and these are the best food people in the Southeast," Gomez said. "That moment was so powerful. It gave me wings and confidence. It was one of the best moments of my career."

The following summer, Gomez closed Cardamom Hill at the height of its popularity. The stress of running a restaurant wasn't a good fit. She refocused her energy on a new concept, The Third Space, a kitchen and event space that she rents for corporate teambuilding events. Other chefs often rent it to work on recipes or do photo shoots. Twice a month, Gomez hosts pop-up dinners that typically sell out within minutes.

Profit margins at The Third Space are many times higher than they were at Cardamom Hill, Gomez says.

Her new business affords Gomez time to travel with her young son, work on another cookbook, and advocate for causes such as microloans that will empower women in developing countries to breed livestock or grow gardens to end hunger. "I want people, especially women, to know that there is an alternative model to opening a full-blown restaurant," Gomez said. "It's not good for us to get bogged down by unsustainable models."

Steven Satterfield, an SFA member and chef of Miller Union in Atlanta, recently rented The Third Space and hired Mosier of Placemat Productions to style food and shoot photos for his new cookbook.

That interconnectedness often pumps revenue from one business to another within the SFA network, which is another enormous benefit for members.

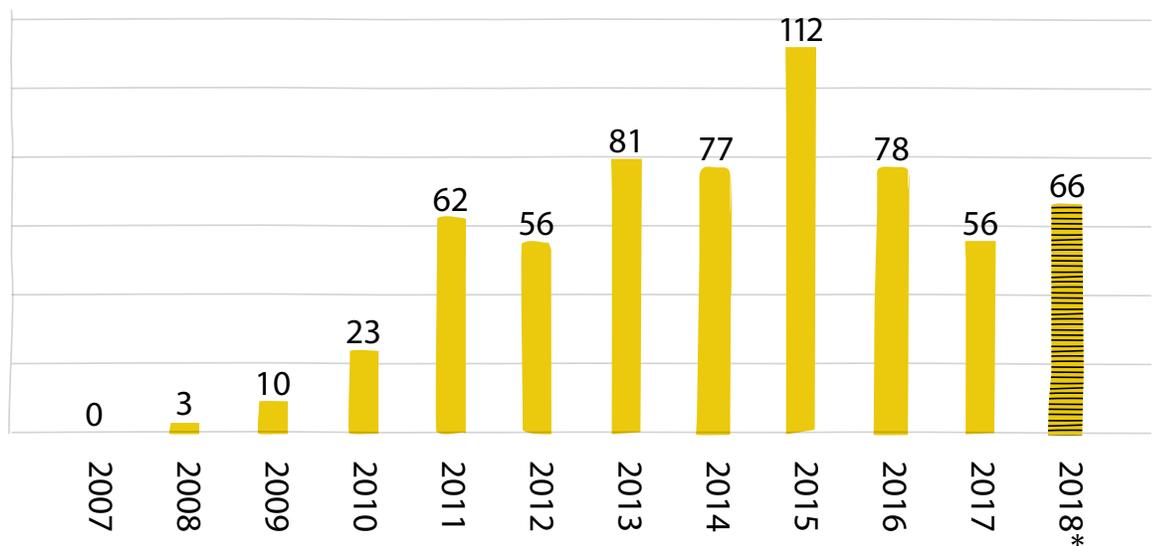
Sean Wilson, the president of Fullsteam Brewing in Durham, North Carolina, got his SFA start pouring sample batches of beer at a Fall Symposium.



When someone jokingly plucked a sprig of basil during a party at Edge's house and stuck it in a can of suds, he discovered how well that herb pairs with certain beers. Fullsteam's Southern Basil Farmhouse Ale is now a bestseller. Media mentions of the brewery have risen more than threefold since 2010, from about 20 articles per year to 70 or more in recent years.

Ann Marshall and Scott Blackwell of High Wire Distilling say SFA led them to Glenn Roberts of Anson Mills, who casually suggested they try making whiskey with an old strain of corn that was popular with moonshiners.

Fullsteam Brewery Media Coverage



Jimmy Red Corn was nearly extinct, but SFA donor Anson Mills helped them find access to seed. Turns out it's a great grain for whiskey, with a nutty flavor and creamy mouthfeel. Their Jimmy Red whiskey is a runaway hit that sells out almost immediately, and has been written about by *NPR*, *Wine & Spirits* magazine, and the *Houston Chronicle*, among others.

They've debated whether to release all of it to meet demand, or hold some back to age longer and develop a more complex flavor. They're doing the latter.

Marshall and Blackwell have made SFA friends so quickly and readily that they often host SFA houseguests even when they're out of town. They call their spare room the Gravy Boat.



“We consider it a family reunion. We do business with a number of people there now, but we don’t take our business cards with us,” Marshall says of the Fall Symposium and of the social networks they have grown. “Its success lies in its authenticity. People do things organically, because it’s right or they’re passionate about it. Not because they’re gaining financial success from it.”

Another example of the SFA revenue cycle is White Oak Pastures in the south Georgia town of Bluffton. Will Harris inherited the 150-year-old family farm after it had been conventionally managed for several decades with insecticides, antibiotics, and other invasive methods common in today’s industrialized food system.

He converted the entire 3,000+ acres into a natural and holistically run operation. Animals don’t receive hormone implants or sub-therapeutic antibiotics, and they aren’t artificially inseminated. Instead of herbicides, ground cover crops help keep down weeds.

Harris affectionately calls his cattle athletes, and they are noticeably leaner and more muscular than feedlot animals who are fed corn and soy. White Oak Pastures sells beef at Whole Foods, Publix, Kroger, and other stores, where it costs 50-75% more than the cellophane-wrapped styrofoam packaged store brands of unknown provenance.

White Oak Pastures meat appears on menus across the South, including Bacchanalia, Restaurant Eugene and Miller Union in Atlanta; and Poole’s Diner in Raleigh, North Carolina. All are run by fellow SFA members.

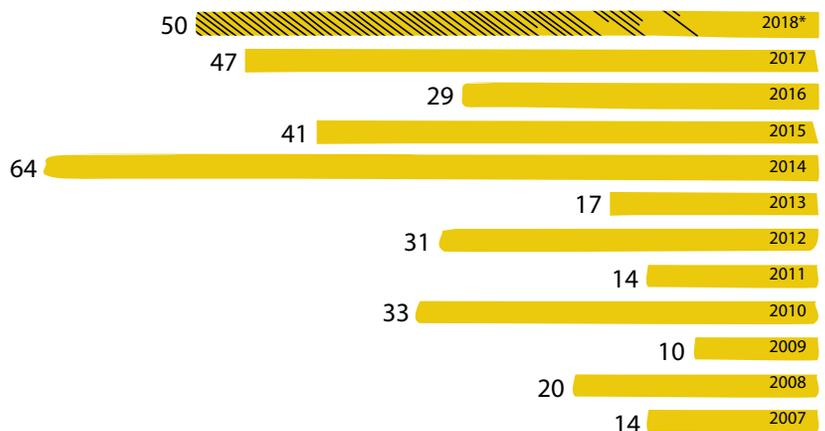
Harris says Edge, Mosier, and others in SFA helped him think of White Oak Pastures as a premium producer of humanely raised protein on a holistic and regenerative farm rather than a livestock operation.

In 2009, SFA produced a short film about Harris called “Cud,” which Whole Foods screened in stores across the nation and has also been screened at festivals across the country. Since that film debuted, media coverage of White Oak Pastures has increased fivefold and the farm is regularly featured in dozens of articles per year in publications such as *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Washington Post*, *Forbes*, and *Bloomberg News*.

White Oak does more than \$20 million in revenue per year and has 150 employees as of mid-2018, Harris says. That’s up from about \$1 million a year in the early 2000s when the farm had just three employees and was 1,000 acres.

“We wouldn’t be where we are today if not for the favorable press over the last 15 years, and that video,” Harris says. SFA has “given me a lot of enlightenment, helped me figure out how this Southern food system works. It’s given me insight on how to view the world.”

White Oak Pastures Media Coverage



IV. What is Southern?

SFA redefines what Southern means and what the modern South is.

Chef and restaurateur Meherwan Irani had heard about SFA for years, and assumed it was a club for chefs who held fancy and indulgent dinners.

Born in London to progressive Indian parents, Irani grew up near Mumbai. He taught himself to cook after moving to Columbia, South Carolina, for graduate school in the 1990s.

After a stint in sales and management in San Francisco, Irani and his wife Molly Irani moved to Asheville, North Carolina, to raise their daughter in a slower-paced city. When the 2008 financial crisis wrecked the luxury homebuilder he'd been working for, he did some soul searching.

One day, it struck him: do what you know. He would open a restaurant.

His wife was skeptical. Irani had no restaurant training, but when he scribbled out a menu in 20 minutes, she was sold.

He opened a small chaat house called Chai Pani in 2009 in Asheville, on a budget of \$70,000. Irani served the Indian street food he'd grown up on: pakoras and uttapam.

The Chai Pani Restaurant Group added a second location in Decatur, Georgia, in 2013 and three years later opened a kebab grill called Botiwalla at Atlanta's Ponce City Market. In Asheville, they opened a bar and lounge called MG Road in 2012, and three years later added a whole-hog barbecue restaurant called Buxton Hall. The staff has swelled to 200. Irani frequently gets invited to cook at fundraisers and festivals.

A film festival brought him to Oxford, Mississippi, where restaurateurs Vishwesh Bhatt and John Currence introduced him to Edge. They chatted about life and work and hit it off.

Irani bought a ticket to the 2017 SFA Fall Symposium, whose theme was El Sur Latino.

He thought he'd meet new farmers or suppliers. He was shocked when speakers shared raw stories about racism and prejudice, and also spoke passionately about embracing their Southernness and redefining the modern South.

"The ground shifted below me," Irani said. "The way I saw myself, my identity in the South. I'm no longer an Indian chef who happens to cook and live in the South. I'm a Southern chef who happens to be from India."

Irani wanted to celebrate other brown-skinned people. He joined Bhatt, Gomez, Maneet Chauhan (owner of several Nashville restaurants), and Cheetie Kumar (chef and owner of Garland in Raleigh) to host a cultural exposition and dinner at Chai Pani Decatur in January of 2018 that benefitted the SFA.

The chefs blended Indian and Southern staples: Kerala fried chicken (sourced from White Oak Pastures), shrimp over an upma porridge made of grits, and gingered cabbage with collard greens.

They called it Brown in the South. It was a sold-out sensation, covered by *Food & Wine*, *Atlanta* magazine, and others. Wilson from Fullsteam Brewing drove six hours to attend, and others flew in from as far away as Chicago.

Irani and his colleagues are organizing recurring dinners, and Brown in the South will soon host a website that gathers news, opinion pieces, and features on minority chefs, growers, writers, and other influencers.

Irani plans to use Brown in the South as a platform to communicate with fellow chefs and restaurateurs. "People think you have to



project this image – the awards, the events, the Instagram followers, the food and wine festivals,” Irani said. “But I want to tell people ‘Don’t get distracted by all that junk.’”

Another example of the SFA’s evolving definition of what is Southern: an Indiana-born chef named Paul Fehribach, who co-owns a Chicago restaurant called Big Jones that specializes in Southern heirloom cooking, made Mobile-style gumbo at the 2018 Fall Symposium.

It might surprise some SFA members that a chef from the North who has never lived in the South was spotlighted as an expert in an Alabama dish.

“A lot of people are going to be saying ‘What the heck?’,” says Melissa Booth Hall, the managing director of SFA. “But there are seven good reasons to have him.”

Fehribach has established himself as a knowledgeable chef who has studied these Southern staples, and knows a great deal about how and why these foods came to be. He also has insights on how these dishes migrated to the North decades ago when Southerners looking for steady work uprooted their families and brought their cuisine with them.

That’s a departure from its early years, when the SFA would book speakers based on past or present residency in the South, Edge said.

“Before, we thought about roots. Now, we think more about connectivity.”

If SFA runs a piece about grandma’s cornbread, the article or podcast will likely have a deeper and richer story about how immigrants are making this staple their own, says Bentley.

“Maybe your mother is Korean and your father is African-American and that influenced how she learned to make this dish,” Bentley said. “Or maybe your mother is a Latina woman who has lived in the South for 20 years and she grew up on corn tortillas and she uses some of those techniques to make her cornbread. You have to bring this larger story of making this Southern staple in very different ways and how this, *this* is the changing South.”



V. It's Complicated

It's not easy to steward an organization like the SFA, whose members have a passionate sense of ownership and authority. One enduring, albeit diminishing, criticism is that SFA is too white and too rich.

SFA's work has, from inception, focused on working class farmers, artisans, and cooks. People of color and immigrants have long been featured chefs and have been the focus of numerous oral histories, films, podcast episodes, and essays in *Gravy*.

The disconnect is with the audience for SFA work. Many members are well-known chefs who own high-profile restaurants, or professionals who earn sizable income that allows them to bankroll donations to SFA and attend numerous food events that can be unaffordable for others.

The fee of \$700 per ticket for the Fall Symposium, which doesn't include lodging or transportation, must be high enough to pay all the speakers and chefs who prepare the meals. The same goes for SFA benefit dinners at member restaurants.

Yet membership to SFA still costs just \$75 per year, the same as it did a decade ago. That rate reflects the democratic intent of the organization, and includes a subscription to the *Gravy* publication, which must also pay the writers and artists who contribute to each edition.

Episodes of the professionally produced *Gravy* podcast are free and available to anyone, as are the documentaries and short films that the public can view anytime on SFA's website or on its channels on video hosting services such as Vimeo.

SFA often books speakers and publishes writing that challenges conventions and invites deep reflection.

Ta-Nehisi Coates, the writer and MacArthur Genius Award winner whose work often explores systemic racial bias, began his keynote at the 2014 Fall Symposium by saying that he'd like to burn the state of Mississippi down. The room was "squirming and alive in all these palpable ways" as people grappled with what was said, one SFA member recalls.

Two years later, when SFA focused a Fall Symposium on corn, Sean Sherman, a Native American chef descended from the Oglala Lakota of South Dakota, conceived a lunch that excluded colonial influenced ingredients such as sugar and flour. The meal of trout, pea shoots, and amaranth cakes challenged some attendees who are accustomed to more lavish fare at SFA events.

"It was not a pleasurable meal as defined by many in the crowd," said Edge. "Pleasure was not the whole point. Our mission is to use food and meal experiences to engage dialogue, not sate culinary cravings."

During a 2013 Summer Symposium in Richmond, Virginia, SFA hosted a slave walk staged by local interpreters. Attendees climbed aboard buses after dinner and were driven to the banks of the James River. They stood in a misty rain, swatting at mosquitoes. Suddenly, guides for the slave walk began shouting.

"They started yelling at us 'Bitch, shut up! Get down!'" recalled one SFA member who is white and female. "It was like, 'Oh my gosh, we are being put through this walk the slaves went through.'"

Two black women from North Carolina were shaken by the unexpected rawness and immersive nature of the experience. The pair stayed up late that night at the hotel and talked with the white woman, whom they didn't know very well, about how it made them feel and what their ancestors must have experienced. "It was emotional and impactful," she said.

SFA organizers recognize how upsetting that experience was for some members.

"As I've processed that trip, I've come to two very different conclusions," says Hall, the SFA's managing director. "First, it never should have been on the program. It was organized by collaborators we'd never worked with before and whose intentions we didn't fully understand. The second is, it's exactly the sort of thing that SFA should always do. It pushed people out of their comfort zone and forced them into an experience they never would have chosen."

The white woman says she is glad that she experienced the slave walk. It gave her a visceral sense of the trauma that enslaved people endured and how those experiences still imprint on their descendents. The SFA felt like the safest place to experience something like that, she said. "I still think about that sometimes. It stayed with me."

VI. Academic Cachet

The academic grounding and professional production quality of SFA's body of work is one of the main attractions for writers, historians, documentarians, journalists, professors, and other influencers.

Nancie McDermott, an SFA contributor and author from Chapel Hill, North Carolina, recalls a moving talk by scholar and culinary historian Dr. Jessica B. Harris of Queens College/CUNY about pralinières, the black women who gained financial independence by selling pralines on the streets of the French Quarter in New Orleans in the mid-19th century.

"They are always bringing in these voices and thinkers and writers I would have never heard from otherwise," said McDermott.

SFA isn't bound by student recruiting drives, construction capital campaigns, and tricky internal politics of academia, says Nystrom of Loyola.

"SFA is a lot more nimble and that gives them freedom to grow," Nystrom said. "They have the academic bent, yet when people wake up on a Tuesday and want to do something creative and new, they can."

In 2014, SFA introduced a Smith Symposium Fellows program that provides complimentary Fall Symposium passes and travel stipends to valued contributors such as academics and writers whose work promises a positive impact on the region and its foodways. Pam and Brook Smith underwrote the fellowship with a \$250,000 gift.

Ashanté Reese, a professor of food studies, anthropology, and sociology at Spelman College in Atlanta who has written for SFA, was awarded a Smith Symposium Fellowship in 2017.

Reese was inspired to see such a diverse group of academics, chefs, restaurateurs, and writers at a gathering that was convivial yet also tackled hard subjects like inequality in an academically grounded way.

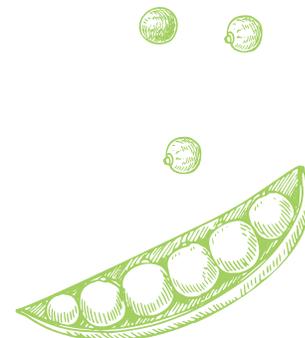
"It was so different than an academic conference," Reese said. "Sometimes it's really hard to get focused on uncomfortable topics. It's my sweet spot."

Without the fellowship, the symposium's \$700 fee probably would have been unattainable for her.

"The symposium is really expensive. I would not ever go if I hadn't been fortunate enough to be selected as a Smith fellow," said Reese, who is working on a book about neighborhoods, race, and food inequalities in Washington, D.C.

Reese appreciates the fellowship. But that effort alone will not drive a "systematic structural change in the organization" that would open it up to more people, she said.

Broad reach and wide access is important to the SFA, which is one reason the organization hasn't raised the \$75 membership fee in a decade and makes much of the professionally produced content available for free on its website.



VII. The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson

Central to SFA's steadily rising influence and national presence is the leadership of John T. Edge, who has been director since inception.

A quick text or email from Edge and even the busiest chefs, restaurateurs, photographers, farmers, or other professionals will carve out time to speak with someone, make an introduction, agree to cook at an event or help in whatever way they are needed.

Raised in Clinton, Georgia, about an hour and a half southeast of Atlanta, he earned a master's degree in Southern Studies at the University of Mississippi in the late 1990s. While there, he organized a 1998 symposium on Southern foodways and bonded with Egerton over a shared vision for what would become SFA.

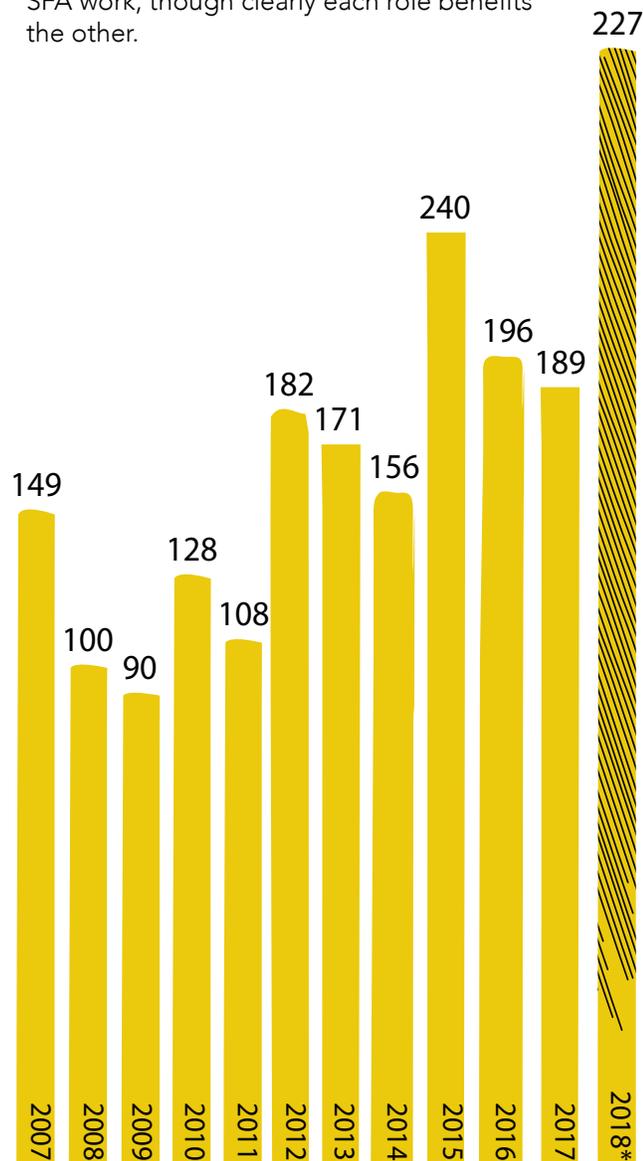
Edge, who also holds a M.F.A. in Creative Nonfiction from Goucher College, has contributed to influential publications including *The New York Times*, *Garden & Gun*, and *Oxford American*.

He's a thought leader and foremost voice on all things related to Southern food, which is why he's often called for commentary by journalists on TV, radio and influential newspapers including *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Los Angeles Times*.

In 2010, he won the M.F.K. Fisher Distinguished Writing Award. Edge wrote a food history of the modern South called *The Potlikker Papers*, which was published in 2017 and explores race, class, and the changing South through food. The book was awarded a prize by the Mississippi Institute of Arts and Letters.

Like many things Edge touches, there is a robust symbiosis between his work for SFA and his extracurriculars. For a dozen years Edge served on the James Beard restaurant awards committee in a personal capacity beginning when he was a contributing editor at *Gourmet* magazine. This service lies outside SFA work, though clearly each role benefits the other.

Southern Foodways Alliance Media Coverage



"If there are ways in which my work outside of SFA benefits the SFA, that's great," Edge said.

Edge, who is 55, says he plans to do more teaching and writing over the next five years and making time for that will mean stepping back from day-to-day SFA leadership at some point.

"There's a lot of cult of personality. It's like 'The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson,' or 'The Daily Show with Jon Stewart,'" said Bentley, the SFA contributor and journalist. "It's going to be hard. They've got to bring in other people, start to groom."

A succession plan is coming into focus. There is a campaign underway to raise \$2.7 million to endow the director position, which will be named for Edge when he retires or assumes a new position. About \$2.2 million has already been committed.

Other SFA leaders such as managing editor Sara Camp Milam and project coordinator Afton Thomas have taken on more visible roles and expanded responsibilities in recent years.

They and others are increasingly being put forward to speak at events while Edge purposefully takes more of a backseat when he's able. Members often mention these other emerging leaders when talking about the future of SFA.

"Success for us will be making rockstars out of our next generation of colleagues, showcasing them, making them people you want at your event or showing up in your backyard," Edge said.



VIII. Where To?

The SFA has a strategic vision and roadmap for growth through 2025.

It boils down to this: **Do more of what we already do well, but on a grander scale while reaching more people.**

To ready itself for a third decade, the SFA developed a new logo and new messaging, which more directly reflects the current mission and vision. In 2018, SFA also retooled and re-launched each and every one of its core products.

To rethink Gravy print and podcast, SFA convened two different three-day sessions with subject matter experts including Dorothy Kalins (*Saveur*), Chris Ying (*Lucky Peach*), Eve Troeh (*Marketplace*), and Wendy Dorr (*Caliphate*, *The New York Times*). SFA also rebuilt its website from the ground up and won a grant to rethink its film and audio archive.

As the budget grows, SFA is hiring staff to elevate its digital strategy and do more targeted marketing. The organization recently hired a dedicated fundraiser who actively seeks gifts from members, and donations in the \$25,000 to \$100,000 range are becoming more frequent. There will be more prominent stewardship of donors and supporters.

Documentary short films and oral histories will always be central to SFA's mission, and that work is launching the careers of a new generation of documentarians and scholars.

In 2015 SFA hired Ava Lowrey as the Pihakis Foodways Documentary Filmmaker to direct and produce foodways films and teach students. She has made dozens of documentaries on subjects as varied as the importance of pinto beans in Southern cooking; a one-stop grocery store and taqueria in rural Siler City, North Carolina; and Dolester Miles, the veteran pastry chef at Highlands Bar and Grill in Birmingham, Alabama, known for elevating Southern classics such as coconut pecan cake with crème anglaise.

SFA will likely develop a popular press book imprint of its own. They've also discussed a seed fund or venture capital fund that could help sustain and grow culturally rich but financially poor entities.

As SFA enters its third decade, leaders have a singular vision of driving further progress in the South and beyond with their academically grounded influence on culture, food, and discourse.

Each new podcast episode, short film, Gravy article, published book, workshop, writers retreat, speaker opportunity, chef invitation, and subsequent exposure in other media further elevates the lives and businesses of people who are positively changing the South.

"SFA has given us a platform to tell our stories, and that storytelling is just as important as what's on the plate in front of us," said Gomez, SFA member and collaborator since 2012.

