

Smothered and Covered: Waffle House and the Southern Imaginary [book review]

By: [Kathelene McCarty Smith](#)

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Abstract:

Book review of: *Smothered and Covered: Waffle House and the Southern Imaginary*. Ty Matejowsky. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2023. ISBN: 9780817394301 210 p. (Hbk) \$39.95

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Smothered and Covered: Waffle House and the Southern Imaginary

Kathelene McCarty Smith
University of North Carolina at Greensboro

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ed to the wealthiest group of planters in America” (p.1). Rice cultivation could not have been possible without the fanner, a coiled basket crafted by enslaved Africans used to fan the rice to blow away the chaff. While rice production was the leading motive behind the manufacture of baskets, other functions would emerge, such as using them for “African American babies sunning in blanket-padded ‘fanner baskets’, supervised by ‘mauma or nurse’ or used as a head tote basket to carry heavy loads or used as sewing, vegetable, and bread baskets, and work baskets” (pp.13-14). “The crafting of baskets also contributed to the economic opportunities and independence of enslaved men, as well as helping women’s mental health through avenues of expression with one sewer stating it’s enjoyed because it’s a relaxing kind of therapy” (p.33).

Explanations of the techniques such as coiling, materials used called the foundation, and stitching elements called the binder or weaver are described in detail. The book provides several illustrations of the tools handled, the labor involved, and the completed creations. In this latest edition, Rosengarten’s expertise in African American basketry is evident from years of fieldwork and investigation, which continues to this day revealing the challenges that are being confronted. “Challenges such as imported knock-offs, scarce sweetgrass, highway development, and the opposition met with trying to convince the newer generations to carry on the tradition threaten the future of the trade” (p.51). The author’s ability to continue the research to include up-to-date information is notable and an indicator of the commitment to South Carolina Lowcountry basketry promotion and education.

The book is clear, concise, and easy to understand, and for readers with no previous knowledge about Lowcountry basket making, African American folk art, or Gullah/Geechee culture, it is exceedingly informative. Rosengarten includes numerous sewers’ experiences that enhance interest, adds authenticity, and gives the reader a glimpse into this traditional craft’s past and present. The limited documentation on Lowcountry basket making, the methods used, the artists’ stories, and the impact these elements had on rice cultivation make this book even more special and valued. It is apparent that the author’s purpose in writing the book is to highlight the tradition and

to ensure that history is preserved.

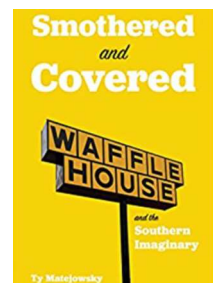
Row Upon Row: Sea Grass Baskets of the South Carolina Lowcountry’s greatest worth is the contribution it has to the safeguarding of Lowcountry African American culture. The content reveals a crucial part of southern history. If readers are drawn to learning about the historical significance of Lowcountry basketry, the specific creation process, and African American art, this book is recommended. It is also a pertinent addition to any public or academic library collection.

Rosengarten is a historian and curator at the College of Charleston whose research of coiled basketry spans three decades. In the early 1980s, McKissick Museum employed Rosengarten to interview basket makers in Mt. Pleasant, South Carolina, purchase baskets, and curate an exhibition showcasing the artistry of basketry. Rosengarten has authored a number of publications centered on the African American tradition of coiled basketry and continues to conduct work in this area of study establishing her as an authoritative expert in the field. Additional Rosengarten titles include *Grass Roots: African Origins of an American Art* and *Lowcountry Basketry: Folk Arts in the Marketplace*.

Rebecca Rose, University of North Georgia

Smothered and Covered: Waffle House and the Southern Imaginary

Ty Matejowsky
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Alabama Press, 2023
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210 p. \$39.95 (Hbk)



Whether the distinctive yellow and black Waffle House sign elicits a sense of comfort or dread, it resonates with many as a familiar friend in the southern landscape. Even the bright yellow book jacket of *Smothered and Covered: Waffle House and the Southern Imaginary*, invokes feelings of nostalgia for a restaurant open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, to provide your breakfast-all-day needs. Yet, author Ty Matejowsky’s book is not a sentimental retrospective of Waffle House. His background as an anthropologist compels him

to look much deeper into the social, cultural, and political significance of the well-known eatery. He traces the beginnings of Waffle House from its origins as a no-frills diner to its eventual extension to almost 2000 restaurants across twenty-four states. Most notably, it outlines how this small regional diner became a reflection of the people it served.

The author begins by recounting his own history with the restaurant chain. On an early morning trip through Texas, Matejowsky and his family found succor from cold and hunger at an obliging Waffle House. With scant holiday decorations, a short-order-cook at the grill, and other customers in various states of consciousness, the little group made their way to a table and began to sample what the diner had to offer. This trip would contribute to his interest in not only the restaurant, but also the people who worked and ate there. He was determined to tackle complicated questions concerning Waffle House. These developed into themes, including the longevity of a dining establishment that has a dichotomous reputation as both a family-friendly restaurant and a haven for a rowdier crowd, the implication of race and class that has become attached to the eatery, and the general love-hate relationship that Waffle House has with its patrons.

Atlanta neighbors Joe Rogers, Sr., and Tom Forkner created Waffle House almost seventy-five years ago with the goal of serving a population eager for southern fare all day. They offered high caloric, high fat, downhome victuals that included waffles (of course), biscuits, bacon, hash-browns, pecan pie, and other breakfast staples. Matejowsky links these meals to foodways originating from European, West African, and Native American cooking, all blending together to form perfect southern comfort food. Even though Waffle House markets themselves to a wider customer base, this underdog chain seems to reflect “core southern credentials,” (p. 11) with its major stronghold equivalent to “a map of the NCAA Southeastern Conference (SEC)” (p. 3). The author notes that the clientele, equally described as coarse and altruistic, often make headlines, which only seems to add to the mystique of the brand. Media coverage aside, the book dives into a subjective view of the restaurant and its regional customer base.

Subsequent chapters cover the chain’s place in America’s growing love of eating out, and the role it played in popular culture. Stories of late-night escapades, as well as more compassionate tales, only enhance Waffle House’s mythology. This lore has been kept alive by its inclusion in movies, books, songs, and images. Yet, the book does not romanticize the chain. In fact, the author casts a critical eye toward the restaurant and its often contradictory reputation. An entire chapter is dedicated to dissecting how the restaurant has dealt with issues of racism involving both its employees and patrons. The chapter specifically addresses the parallel histories of the chain and the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, noting significant examples of discrimination and inequality. Although the author discusses the Waffle House’s failure to successfully address these issues, he also holds other similar chains accountable, such as IHOP and Cracker Barrel.

Ultimately, *Smothered and Covered: Waffle House and the Southern Imaginary* provides a fascinating look at how the restaurant took the lead in breakfast eateries during a time of political, socioeconomic, and demographic change in our country. It tells the story of its expansion through the southeast and the Gulf Coast states, and its connection to that region, for better and for worse. It also records the complicated relationship that the diner has with its patrons and its workers, and it does so without slipping into sentimentality or romanticism. With the Waffle House poised to move into wider markets, it remains to be seen if it truly maintains its southern imaginary.

Kathelene McCarty Smith, University of North Carolina at Greensboro

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